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Allegiances

THUNDERCLAN

Leader: Bluestar-blue-gray she-cat, tinged with silver around her muzzle

Deputy: Fireheart-handsome ginger tom

Apprentice, Cloudpaw

Medicine cat: Waterlily-a pretty long-haired, calico she-cat with bright amber eyes

Warriors: Whitestorm-big white tom

Apprentice, Brightpaw

Darkstripe-sleek black-and-gray tabby tom

Apprentice, Fernpaw

Longtail-pale tabby tom with dark black stripes

Apprentice, Swiftpaw

Mousefur-small dusky-brown she-cat

Apprentice, Thornpaw

Brackenfur-golden-brown tabby tom

Dustpelt-dark brown tabby tom

Apprentice, Ashpaw

Sandstorm-pale ginger she-cat

Apprentice, Shadowpaw

Cinderpelt-small and sleek-furred, smokey-dark gray she-cat

Apprentices: Swiftpaw-black-and-white tom

Cloudpaw-long-haired white tom

Brightpaw-she-cat, white with ginger splotches

Thornpaw-golden-brown tabby tom

Fernpaw-pale gray with darker flecks, she-cat, pale green eyes

Ashpaw-pale gray with darker flecks, tom, dark blue eyes

Shadowpaw-medium-haired solid black tom with bright green eyes

Queens: Frostfur-beautiful white coat and blue eyes

Brindleface-pretty tabby

Goldenflower-pale ginger coat

Speckletail-pale tabby, and the oldest nursery queen

Willowpelt-very pale gray she-cat with unusual blue eyes

Elders: Smallear-gray tom with very small ears; the oldest tom in ThunderClan

One-eye-pale gray she-cat, the oldest she-cat in ThunderClan; virtually blind and deaf

Dappletail-once-pretty tortoiseshell she-cat with a lovely dappled coat

SHADOWCLAN

Leader: Tigerstar-big dark brown tabby tom with unusually long front claws, formerly of ThunderClan

Deputy: Blackfoot-large white tom with huge jet-black paws, formerly a rogue cat

Medicine cats: Runningnose-small gray-and-white tom

Warriors: Littlecloud-very small tabby tom

Oakfur-small brown tom

Darkflower-black she-cat

Boulder-silver tabby tom, formerly a rogue cat

Russetfur-dark ginger she-cat, formerly a rogue cat

Apprentice, Cedarpaw

Jaggedtooth-huge tabby tom, formerly a rogue cat

Apprentice, Rowanpaw

Queens: Tallpoppy-long-legged light brown tabby she-cat

WINDCLAN

Leader: Tallstar-black-and-white tom with a very long tail

Deputy: Deadfoot-black tom with a twisted paw

Medicine cats: Barkface-short-tailed brown tom

Warriors: Mudclaw-mottled dark brown tom

Webfoot-dark gray tabby tom

Tornear-tabby tom

Tawnyfur-golden brown she-cat

Onewhisker-brown tabby tom

Apprentice, Gorsepaw

Runningbrook-light gray tabby she-cat

Queens: Ashfoot-gray queen

Morningflower-tortoiseshell queen

RIVERCLAN

Leader: Crookedstar-huge light-colored tabby with a twisted jaw

Deputy: Leopardfur-unusually spotted golden tabby she-cat

Medicine cats: Mudfur-long-haired light brown tom

Warriors: Blackclaw-smoky black tom

Heavystep-thickest tabby tom

Apprentice, Dawnpaw (very pale gray she-cat)

Stonefur-gray tom with battle-scarred ears

Shadepelt-very dark gray she-cat

Loudbelly-dark brown tom

Graystripe-long-haired gray tom, formerly of ThunderClan

Mistyfoot-gray she-cat with blue eyes

Queens:

Mosspelt-tortoiseshell she-cat

Elders: Graypool-thin gray she-cat with patchy fur and a scarred muzzle

Prologue

A small black tom was born just beside the thunderpath, in a small patch of grass next to the rushing monsters. His mother had been searching for a place to give birth, and in her desperation, she had chosen this dangerous spot.

He and his siblings were born into a world of noise and danger, with the constant roar of the thunderpath and the threat of passing monsters. They were too young to understand the danger, and they snuggled up close to their mother for warmth and comfort.

His mother he knew and loved was suddenly gone. He cried out for her, but he was too weak to make a sound. He laid there in silence, his tiny body growing weak.

As the days passed, he became more and more alone. His siblings grew weaker and passed on, but he remained strong, yet helpless; he was still too weak to crawl away from the dangerous spot.

His world had shrunk to the small space around him, and he grew more and more afraid. He didn't understand what was happening, why his mother had been taken from him, or why he felt so alone and helpless.

He could then smell something luring around where he laid. He flattened his ears and wanted to hiss furiously, but knew it could be dangerous to alert the creature of his presence. He laid as still as he could. Then a pair of pretty amber eyes spotted him. He widened his green gaze and looked up at her in awe, though he was still weary of her.

"Can you speak?" Meowed the she-cat. She lowered her head to the kit's level and blinked lovingly to him like a mother would to their kit.

The small kit looked up at her and tilted his head. He hesitated in response, not knowing what to say or do. He felt helpless enough.

He then tried to speak, but nothing but a small mew came out from his mouth. The calico she-cat took him in her jaws and trekked through the forest. He padded to a den and gently placed him down in front of another cat. He widened his eyes in alarm. *Am I going to get eaten?* He began to breath harder, but then heard the soothing voice of the other she-cat. "He doesn't smell of any Clan scent."

He then purred in amusement, but was still weary of her. He did, however, save him and this she-cat could possibly be his new mother. He scrambled to his paws and padded awkwardly to the white she-cat. He rubbed against her and could just sense a faint scent of milk on the queen. He purred and snuggled up to her. The white queen looked down at him with soft and loving eyes.

"Alright. But if the mother comes looking for him, he's leaving." She mewed.

"Thank you Frostfur." The calico she-cat mewed, then she padded away.

Frostfur was the name of his new mother. He rubbed against her one more time and knew that he and Frostfur would be inseparable.

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Frostfur licked his chest and he tumbled over his paws. "I'm sorry, little one." She mewed with amusement. The small black kit didn't have a name, but Frostfur called him Honey often. Frostfur licked him again and held him in her paws so he didn't tumble away. He tried to get away from her grasp, but couldn't. "Hold still, honey." She rasped while still licking his flank.

"We should have known!" Hissed a tabby tom.

Honey whirled around and widened his eyes as the tabby tom bristled his fur. He flattened his ears but then saw the she-cat that had rescued him step in.

"I should have known that you wouldn't like him." She taunted back, then padded over to the kit and the queen.

Frostfur then dipped her head. "Thank you, Waterlily."

Honey looked up at her in awe. He batted at her tuft of fur on Waterlily's chest then she leaped over him and padded to the highrock. She whispered something to the blue-gray she-cat sitting up there. She moved off to the side and let Waterlily speak. Her voice wasn't strong, but she was heard across the crowd of cats that stood below her. "I brought this kit here because he was most likely abandoned from some loner. I have asked Frostfur to take care of him until his mother comes looking for him." She paused, then continued. "His name for now will be Shadowkit." She looked over the crowd of cats and him.

Shadowkit purred delightly at his new name. He felt like he had belonged to a family he could now trust and love. Frostfur licked his head again and he closed his eyes tightly. He never wanted to leave this comfortable life as a Clan cat.

Chapter One

Shadowpaw padded quietly through the undergrowth, his paws sinking into the soft earth as he followed his mentor, Sandstorm. She led him to a small clearing, where they would have their battle training session.

"Okay, Shadowpaw," Sandstorm said, turning to face him. "We're going to start with some basic moves. I want you to practice your defense and counterattacks."

Shadowpaw nodded eagerly, feeling his heart race with excitement. He knew that battle training was an important part of becoming a warrior, and he was eager to prove himself.

Sandstorm crouched down, her eyes fixed on Shadowpaw. "I'm going to come at you with a frontal attack. I want you to block it and then counterattack."

Shadowpaw nodded again, focusing his attention on Sandstorm. As she lunged at him, he crouched down, bracing himself for impact. At the last moment, he twisted to the side, letting Sandstorm's paws swipe harmlessly past him.

"Good job," Sandstorm meowed, her eyes sparkling with pride. "Now, counterattack."

Shadowpaw wasted no time. He lunged forward and landed a blow on Sandstorm's shoulder. She grunted in surprise, but quickly recovered and launched a counterattack of her own.

For the next few minutes, Shadowpaw and Sandstorm continued their training session, exchanging blows and practicing their defense and counterattacks. Shadowpaw could feel himself growing more confident with each passing moment, his instincts taking over as he focused on his opponent.

As the session drew to a close, Sandstorm smiled at Shadowpaw.

"You're doing great," she purred. "You have a lot of potential, and I'm proud to be your mentor."

Shadowpaw felt a surge of pride at her words. He knew that he still had much to learn, but he was determined to work hard and become the best warrior he could be. He followed Sandstorm back to the edge of the large Oak Tree and she turned to face him.

"See that scent over there?" She meowed, pointing to a faint trail of scent on the ground. "That's a rabbit. Follow it and see if you can find where it's hiding."

Shadowpaw nodded and set off, his nose twitching as he followed the scent trail. He was hunting in a very different way. He felt as if he was being watched by the whole of StarClan. He soon found himself crouching behind a bush, watching as a plump rabbit nibbled on a patch of grass.

"Now what?" Shadowpaw whispered, turning to Sandstorm. Sandstorm padded up to him and she crouched down beside him.

"Patience," Sandstorm replied. "Watch the rabbit, and when it's distracted, pounce!"

Shadowpaw waited, his muscles coiled like springs, until the rabbit's head was down. Then he launched himself forward, his claws outstretched.

The rabbit saw him at the last moment and darted away, but Shadowpaw was quick. He chased after it, dodging through the trees and leaping over fallen logs. Finally, with a burst of speed, he caught up to the rabbit and pounced, sinking his teeth into its neck.

"Great job, Shadowpaw!" Sandstorm purred, padding up to him. "That was an excellent catch. Not many experienced warriors can even catch a rabbit. I suppose that I have a challenger."

Shadowpaw's eyes shone with pride. "If you're my opponent, I don't think I stand a chance."

Sandstorm's green eyes gleamed with compassion for her apprentice. "Nonsense. I think you'd be a great opponent one day.

Don't underestimate yourself." She then paused and sniffed the air. "Those squirrels would make a great catch," Sandstorm added, her eyes glinting with excitement.

Shadowpaw's ears perked up at the challenge. He had never caught a squirrel before, and he was eager to try. "Let's do it," he mewed, his tail twitching with anticipation.

Sandstorm nodded. "That's the spirit!"

Shadowpaw looked up at the tree, unsure of what to do. Sandstorm could see the doubt in his eyes and quickly reassured him. "Don't worry, Shadowpaw. Climbing a tree is easy. Just watch me and do what I do." She said, reassuringly.

Sandstorm gracefully bounded up the trunk of the oak, her claws gripping the bark with ease. She moved quickly, her body heaving as she shifted her weight to reach the next branch. Shadowpaw watched in awe, impressed by her skill.

When Sandstorm had reached a suitable branch, she called out to Shadowpaw. "Come on, it's your turn now."

Shadowpaw hesitated for a moment but then took a deep breath and approached the tree. He tried to imitate Sandstorm's movements, but his paws kept slipping on the bark, and he couldn't find a good grip.

"Don't worry, keep trying," Sandstorm encouraged him. "You'll get it. Just one jump after the other."

Shadowpaw took a few more attempts, but with Sandstorm's guidance, he soon found his footing. He was now clinging to the bark, his claws sinking into the rough surface.

"Great job, Shadowpaw," Sandstorm praised him. "Now, the squirrel is just a few branches away. If you don't feel safe jumping over there, I will."

Shadowpaw took one look over the next few branches and shook his head. "Heights is not my strong point right now." He mewed, not wanting to sound too pleadingly.

Sandstorm dipped her head then raced after the squirrel. It scattered in all directions, chattering in alarm. But Sandstorm was quick. She chased the squirrel, leaping from branch to branch with effortless grace.

Finally, she caught up to the squirrel and pounced, sinking her teeth into its neck. She then leaped down from the tree branch and landed with a slight thud. Shadowpaw looked down from his perch and felt a twinge of fear in his stomach. The ground seemed far away, and he wasn't sure how to get down without hurting himself.

"Don't worry, I'm right here to guide you," Sandstorm reassured him.

She then showed Shadowpaw how to lower himself down from the tree, using his hind legs to grip the trunk and his front paws to reach down to the next branch.

"Move slowly and carefully, and don't jump," She instructed him. "Just take your time, and you'll be down in no time."

Shadowpaw took a deep breath and started to make his way down the tree. He followed Sandstorm's instructions, and soon he was back on the ground, his paws firmly planted on the forest floor.

"Great job, Shadowpaw!" Sandstorm exclaimed, nuzzling him affectionately. "You're really getting the hang of this."

"I don't think I'll be climbing any trees any time soon." He purred, amusingly.

"I won't make you. It's not for every cat, even ThunderClan cats." She looked up at silverpelt and noticed the darkness beginning to settle in. "Come on. We best be getting back to camp."

Shadowpaw and Sandstorm grabbed their prey and they set back to camp. When they arrived they set their prey in the fresh-kill pile. Fireheart padded up to them. "You caught all that?" He meowed, clearly in shock.

Shadowpaw suddenly felt dumb-founded. "I...uh... caught the rabbit." He stuttered.

"Whoa. Sandstorm really is a great mentor if someone other than her can catch them." He praised.

Shadowpaw then stood tall and proud. With a compliment like that from the deputy was truly an honor. And by that, he knew that becoming a warrior will be a real proud moment for him and his mentor.

Chapter Two

Waterlily's depression was beginning to go downhill and most of her duties were going untouched. Her once bright and lively demeanor had been replaced with a slow and melancholic gait. The death of Yellowfang had hit her particularly hard, and she found it challenging to come to terms with the loss of her beloved mentor.

As Waterlily was gathering herbs by the river, she sat down and stared at the water, lost in her thoughts. She missed Yellowfang's guidance and her wise words, and the thought of never seeing her again was too much to bear.

"Waterlily?" A voice interrupted her thoughts. She then suddenly could see a few stars twinkling to the right of in the reflection of the river. She quickly turned around and saw Featherwhisker. She shook her head to clear it. Was she dreaming?

"Are you okay?" Featherwhisker asked, concerned.

Waterlily shook her head. "No, I'm not okay. I miss Yellowfang so much. I feel lost without her." She ran toward him and pressed her forehead against his flank.

Featherwhisker nodded sympathetically. "I understand how you feel. Losing a mentor is never easy, but remember, she will always be with you in your memories and in your heart."

Waterlily looked at Featherwhisker and sighed. "I know you're right, but it's hard to move on. I feel like I'm stuck in this sadness, and I don't know how to get out of it."

Featherwhisker gave her a gentle nudge. "Come on, let's take a walk. Maybe some fresh air and a change of scenery will help clear your mind."

Waterlily hesitated for a moment, thinking it wouldn't help, but

Featherwhisker seemed to know what to do, so she followed him. As they walked, Featherwhisker told her stories about his own struggles and how he overcame them. He reminded Waterlily that she was strong and capable of facing any challenge that came her way.

Waterlily purred at the stories he told her. She then felt a sudden change in feeling - like her spirits were being lifted. "Thank you, Featherwhisker." She dipped her head and closed her eyes in respect.

Featherwhisker did the same. "Of course." He then turned to pad away. "Go to the Moonstone tonight with the other medicine cats. It'll do you some good." He added, then raced out of sight.

Waterlily was left alone, but now filled with compassion once more. She padded back into camp and began sorting through the herbs with more care and passion like before. The medicine den was finally coming together.

As the half-moon shined overhead, Waterlily joined the other medicine cats at the entrance of the Moonstone cave. They all bowed their heads and waited for the sign from StarClan to enter. As the moon reached its peak, a beam of silver light shone down on them and they all padded into the tunnel. As Waterlily approached the Moonstone, she felt a sense of anticipation and excitement mixed with a tinge of sadness. *Would she see Yellowfang here?*

As she touched her nose to the smooth surface of the Moonstone, Waterlily closed her eyes and opened herself up to the world of StarClan. She felt a sudden jolt, as if she were being pulled through a tunnel, and then she found herself standing in a clearing surrounded by stars. In front of her stood Yellowfang, looking as she did when she was alive. Waterlily couldn't believe her eyes and hesitated for a moment before rushing forward and embracing her mentor.

"Yellowfang, I miss you so much," Waterlily whispered, tears streaming down her face.

Yellowfang purred softly and nuzzled her cheek. "I miss you too,

Waterlily. But I am always with you, in your heart and in your dreams." She then licked the tears from Waterlily's face.

"But it's not the same," Waterlily replied. "I miss your guidance, your wisdom, your presence."

Yellowfang's expression softened. "I understand, Waterlily. But you must find your own way now, and trust in the knowledge and skills that I taught you. You are a capable and strong medicine cat, and you will continue to serve your Clan well."

Waterlily nodded, taking comfort in Yellowfang's words. "I will try, Yellowfang.

Yellowfang leaned in closer. "No medicine cat has all the answers, and it is important to seek guidance from your ancestors and the spirits around you. Trust in your instincts and your connection to StarClan, and you will always find your way."

Waterlily looked into Yellowfang's eyes, feeling a sense of calm wash over her. "Thank you. I needed to hear that."

Yellowfang gave her a reassuring purr. "I am always here for you, whenever you need me." She then padded into the distance and faded from view. Waterlily watched her leave in awe. Without her, she would be forever lost, but with the whole of StarClan on her side, she felt a relentless sense of happiness.

As Waterlily blinked opened her eyes, she felt a sense of peace wash over her. She felt as if a heavy burden had been lifted from her shoulders. She looked around and saw the other medicine cats, who had finished their own conversations with their ancestors.

"Are you alright, Waterlily?" asked Mudfur.

Waterlily nodded, feeling a sense of gratitude towards her fellow medicine cats. "Yes, thank you. I feel...better."

"That's good to hear. I know losing Yellowfang must have been hard." Mudfur mewed, pressing himself against Waterlily in comfort.

"I have to say it was, and still is. But I saw her in StarClan, so I know she is alright."

Mudfur widened his eyes. Medicine cats aren't normally allowed to share what they saw or heard in StarClan, but Waterlily had openly told him who she had spoken to. He then tilted his head to the side. "And she reassured you?" Careful not to pry any unsettling questions.

Waterlily nodded. "Yes. Of course." She then paused and looked up at silverpelt. "It's beginning to get light out. We should get going. I don't want the dawn patrol to be worried."

With that, they all dipped their heads and padded back to camp. Waterlily trekked a little faster, hoping to get back to her medicine cat duties. There was much still to be done and she was behind on almost everything.

When she returned to camp, Whitestorm raced over to her. "Glad you're back. I was beginning to get worried."

Waterlily dipped her head to the old warrior. "Sorry." She mewed. "I didn't mean to keep you waiting."

Whitestorm then flicked his tail and the dawn patrol headed up the ravine and through the gorse tunnel. Waterlily padded to the medicine den and sighed with relief to finally be back. She circled around her nest and tucked her paws under her chest. She closed her eyes and slept for a few hours before waking up and getting back to her duties. Once she awoke, she immediately began sorting through the leftover herbs she had in stock. Once she finished, she counted the small stock she had of catmint, daisies and marigold. She was just about finished when Fireheart padded inside the den.

"Shadowpaw is doing really well." He reported. He then saw Waterlily filled with more spirit and stood a little taller.

Waterlily looked up from counting and purred with delight. "I am glad. Sandstorm was a great choice for him."

"Yes, she is a good challenge for him." He agreed.

Waterlily then went back to counting. Fireheart could feel a sense of pain in his old friend, but he decided not to pry. It would be best to let Waterlily come to him when she needed the help and guidance.

Chapter Three

Shadowpaw listened carefully as Sandstorm instructed him to head to the elders' den and help them get rid of their fleas. He nodded eagerly and made his way towards the den. As he neared them, he saw Smallear, Dappletail, and One-eye all lounging in the sun, just outside their den, seemingly lost in thought.

"Hello, Shadowpaw," Smallear greeted him, his voice a little scratchy. "Are you here to help us with our fleas?"

"Yes, I am," Shadowpaw replied, a little apprehensively.

"Don't worry, young one," Dappletail chimed in, "We won't bite."

One-eye snorted, "Speak for yourself!"

The elders all shared a chuckle, and Shadowpaw couldn't help but purr with amusement. They may have been old and grumpy at times, but they still had a sense of humor. As he began to groom the elders and search for fleas, he couldn't help but listen in on their conversation. They were sharing stories about their time in ThunderClan, and Shadowpaw was fascinated.

"It happened many moons ago," She began.

"Oh this tale again?" Rapsed Smallear.

"Shush!" Hissed Dappletail. "Continue, One-eye." She added, purring.

One-eye dipped her head then continued. "I was out on a hunting patrol with my mentor and some other warriors, and we stumbled across a badger's den. We knew it was dangerous to mess with a badger, but we wanted to make sure it wasn't a threat to our Clan."

As she spoke, Shadowpaw could see the memories playing out in her mind. He then felt a flea buried in her scruff. He bit down and heard a small crunching sound. He spit the flea out that was stuck

in his teeth, then he continued searching for more fleas.

"We approached the den cautiously, but the badger was waiting for us." One-eye continued. "It charged out of the den, snarling and snapping. We fought it as best we could, but it was strong and fast. It managed to claw me in the eye before we drove it off."

Shadowpaw lifted his muzzle. "That must have been pretty bad." He scrunched up his nose in disgust at the thought of seeing such an injury. Her eye now was all healed and was just a scar. He felt another flea just below her shoulder. He bit down again and spit the remaining parts that stuck in his teeth.

"It hurt badly." She retorted. "My apprenticeship was delayed because of it." She softly hissed, bristling her fur. She then relaxed and continued. "Goosefeather, the medicine cat at the time, took care of me and I never let the badger get the better of me. I kept my spirits up ever since."

"Was your warrior name always One-eye?" He meowed, curiously. He then moved on to Dappletail. She had one flea just below her ear.

"Of course not!" One-eye rasped. "I was known as Whitepaw then. When I lost my sight, my warrior name was then White-eye. Then it changed to One-eye once I retired to the elder's den."

After finishing his duties in the elders' den, Shadowpaw went to find Sandstorm to report his completed task. He found her near the fresh-kill pile, sharing a mouse with Fireheart.

"Ah, Shadowpaw, you're back," Sandstorm said, noticing him approach. "How was it? Did you manage to get rid of all those pesky fleas?"

Fireheart got to his paws and shook out his pelt. "I'll see you later, Sandstorm."

Sandstorm dipped her head then turned her gaze back to Shadowpaw.

"Yes," Shadowpaw replied. "The elders were sharing some

interesting stories too. One-eye told me about how she lost her eye in a battle with a badger."

Sandstorm nodded, her expression turning serious. "That's a tough story, but it's a reminder of how dangerous life can be outside of our Clan. We need to be prepared for anything, even badgers."

"You've heard it before?" Shadowpaw tilted his head.

"Of course. The elders tend to share the same stories, but they're really good overall to listen to for the apprentices. It helps keep them in line." She purred, amused by his curiosity.

The day seemed to have gone by slowly and he stayed him camp all day. He felt bored, but Sandstorm told him it was what all the apprentices had to do.

Once the sun began to set, Shadowpaw settled into his nest for the night, his thoughts kept returning to Waterlily. He had noticed that she had been more withdrawn than usual, and he couldn't help but worry about her. He knew that she had been close to Yellowfang, and her death had been a huge blow to the medicine cat.

Finally, he decided to take action. He got up from his nest and quietly made his way over to the medicine cat den. As he peeked inside, he saw the shelves were finally stocked, and the herb piles that were normally scattered around her, were now neatly tucked away in their spots. Waterlily sat at the edge of the small pool of water. She lifted her muzzle and purred warmly at his presence. "Shadowpaw, it's nice to see you again."

"It looks like you're doing better." He mewed, sitting down and wrapping his fluffy tail over his front paws.

Waterlily did the same and sat just a tail-length in front of him. "I am doing better." She confessed. "Though it was hard, I was able to come to my senses. My medicine duties should never be neglected. I feel like I let the whole Clan down." She looked down at her paws.

"No. You were just grieving." He meowed rather quickly. "Everyone knew that."

Waterlily looked back up at him and met his green eyes with her amber gaze. She softened her eyes and lightly purred. "I saw Yellowfang in StarClan and I was able to speak with her." She confessed.

Shadowpaw widened his eyes. "You saw her?" He didn't understand the ways of a medicine cat and had quite forgotten they could see their ancestors. Even though he knew StarClan existed, it was all a mystery to him.

"Yes. She was able to comfort me like old times." She purred, closing her eyes in memory of her old friend and mentor.

Shadowpaw nodded sympathetically. "I can't imagine how amazing that must have been. But you're not alone, Waterlily. ThunderClan is here for you, and so am I."

Waterlily purred gratefully at him. "Thank you, Shadowpaw. You're wise beyond your years."

The two of them sat in comfortable silence for a few moments, before Shadowpaw rose to his paws. "I should probably get back to my nest before someone notices I'm gone. But if you ever need someone to talk to, I'm here for you."

Waterlily nodded, looking touched. "Thank you, Shadowpaw. You're a true friend."

With that, Shadowpaw made his way back to the apprentice den, feeling a sense of warmth and connection to Waterlily that he had never felt before; even more so when she first rescued him and brought him here to the Clan life.

Chapter Four

Waterlily scrambled to her paws and pricked her ears. She half expected Yellowfang to be a few tail-lengths beside her as always, but her nest was empty. It smelled of ash from the fire and there was no sign of Yellowfang's old scents. She tossed the moss behind the den to clean it up a bit then padded back inside with a small sigh of relief, yet also sadness.

"Waterlily." Mewed a voice from outside the den.

Waterlily poked her head out and saw a flame-colored tom standing just outside the entrance. His eyes were wide with concern. "What's up?" She replied, tilting her head to the side.

"I am worried about Bluestar. I know she won't take any herbs, but she has been up in her den for too long." His mew was hoarse, but he tried to stay calm. "She needs to be our leader again." He finished.

Waterlily dipped her head in respect. "You're right, she does need to lead us, though I have doubts she will listen to me."

Fireheart bristled his neck fur. "You must get her to understand!"

Waterlily widened her eyes. How would she get an old she-cat as stubborn as Bluestar to listen to her? She nodded reluctantly, but said nothing, knowing he may not know just how stubborn Bluestar really is.

Waterlily took a deep breath as she approached the leader's den, her heart pounding in her chest. She knew that it wouldn't be an easy one.

"Come in," Bluestar's voice called out from inside the den.

Waterlily pushed aside the ivy curtain and stepped inside, her eyes meeting Bluestar's steady gaze.

"Waterlily, what can I do for you?" Bluestar asked.

Waterlily took a deep breath, then spoke the words that had been weighing heavily on her heart.

"Bluestar, I need to speak with you about your leadership."

Bluestar's expression remained neutral, but Waterlily could see the surprise in her eyes. "What about my leadership?"

Waterlily hesitated for a moment, then spoke honestly. "I know that Tigerstar has worried you as of late, but we need you to lead us."

Bluestar's eyes widened and her breath became heavy with concern. "*Tigerstar*?"

Waterlily widened her eyes, forgetting that Bluestar was not at the last Gathering and knew nothing of Tigerclaw becoming leader of ShadowClan. "Uh... yeah. He's now leader of ShadowClan."

Bluestar shook her head slowly in doubt. "No. This cannot be." She rose to her paws and began pacing the den.

Waterlily watched her pace back and forth a few times before speaking. "I'm sorry, Bluestar." She hung her head down low.

Bluestar then stopped and gazed up at Waterlily. "So he has all nine lives as a leader should?"

Waterlily narrowed her eyes and tilted her head to the side. "I would expect so." She mewed softly. "Why wouldn't he?" Bluestar sighed and began pacing again as if she was trying to plan something. Waterlily watched her again in silence waiting for an answer.

After a long moment Bluestar finally spoke, but she didn't stop herself from going back and forth from one end to the other of her den. "StarClan wouldn't just give a trader nine lives. He has to be lying. We could..." She quickly stopped herself from finishing, knowing it probably a bad idea.

Waterlily knew very well what she was about to say. "We could just

attack and kill him..." She finished for her.

Bluestar paced back and forth in her den, her mind consumed with thoughts of Tigerstar's ascent to leadership in ShadowClan. She knew that he was a cunning and dangerous cat, and she feared that he would use his newfound power to threaten ThunderClan.

As she paced, her thoughts turned to Waterlily. "What if we attack them before they attack us? We cannot afford to wait and see what Tigerstar does next."

Waterlily was taken aback by Bluestar's sudden change in attitude. "Bluestar, are you sure? Attacking ShadowClan would be a dangerous move. It could put ThunderClan in a vulnerable position."

"I am sure," Bluestar replied firmly. "I am tired of waiting for them to make the first move. We need to act before it's too late."

Waterlily looked at Bluestar with concern. "Bluestar, you are not acting like yourself. This is not a decision to be made lightly. It will affect the lives of all ThunderClan cats, and we could be facing a war."

Bluestar paused, but then narrowed her eyes. "This must happen. Tigerstar must be no more."

Waterlily shook her head slowly and took a few paces backwards. "Bluestar, please, listen to me." She urged.

Bluestar narrowed her eyes to slits. "I am leader of ThunderClan, Waterlily. Now go back to your medicine cat duties."

Waterlily left Bluestar's den in frustration. She knew Bluestar was stubborn, but she had to listen to her. If they made a war with ShadowClan, ThunderClan would be no more. She trekked to her den deep in thought and almost ran into Fireheart.

"So?" He asked, wide eyes and desperate. "Did you speak to her?"

Waterlily froze, not wanting to tell him the whole story. She looked down and shuffled her paws, then began to speak slow and steady.

"I did speak to her, yes."

"And?" Fireheart pressed on.

Waterlily softly sighed. "And she's now planning an attack on ShadowClan to get rid of Tigerstar." She mewed rather quickly.

Fireheart widened his eyes in dismay. "Planning an attack?" He repeated. "Did you tell her she was mouse-brained?"

"Of course I did!" She hissed, glaring into his dark green eyes. " She's stubborn, remember?"

Fireheart narrowed his eyes in frustration. "She can't be this stubborn! She must listen to us. We will lose against Tigerstar."

"I tried to reason with her, Fireheart." She mewed more calmly. "But she has made her decision. We can't force her to choose differently."

"Well maybe you can't." Hissed Fireheart. He stomped towards Bluestar's den then stopped just before he got to the entrance. He looked back at Waterlily and softened his eyes. "Maybe I can reason with her." He meowed calmly. Then he padded inside her den with confidence.

Waterlily watched in silence. She sat down and wrapped her tail around her front paws and waited for Fireheart to come back out. She prayed to StarClan silently that Fireheart could make her understand, but she feared that StarClan might not be able to help their leader now.

Chapter Five

Shadowpaw walked out of the den, eager to start his evening patrol. He saw Sandstorm waiting for him at the entrance, along with Whitestorm, Darkstripe, and Dustpelt. Fernpaw and Ashpaw sat behind them.

"Are you ready for patrol, Shadowpaw?" Sandstorm asked, flicking her tail.

"Yes!" Shadowpaw mewed eagerly, bounding up to join them.

As they headed out of camp, he followed them down into Sunningrocks. All was quiet, then Shadowpaw saw a flash of gray fur in the distance. It was Shadepaw. He recognized her from the Gathering. He pricked his ears and saw that she was alone. He tilted his head to the side and wondered why she was just sitting near the river. She didn't appear to be hunting for fish. She just sat there staring out into space as if she was planning something. Her green eyes were narrowed and focused on something in the distance.

"Stay focused, Shadowpaw," Sandstorm reminded him firmly. "We are on patrol, and we need to keep our eyes and ears open."

Shadowpaw shook his head to clear it and continued on patrol, Shadowpaw couldn't help but feel frustrated. He wanted to know what was going on with Shadepaw and why she was alone. He turned to Sandstorm."Do you think RiverClan is up to something?"

"It's hard to say," Sandstorm replied. "But it's always important to stay alert and be prepared for anything."

"RiverClan has been known to be sneaky in the past. We should keep a close eye on them." Added Whitestorm.

Shadowpaw narrowed his eyes and couldn't focus on anything other than the tension between the clans as they neared the border of ShadowClan.

As they padded back to the ThunderClan camp, Sandstorm turned to him and said, "Good job today, Shadowpaw. You stayed alert and kept your senses sharp."

Shadowpaw felt a sense of pride wash over him. As they entered the clearing, they were greeted by a flurry of activity. Warriors were coming and going, and there seemed to be a sense of urgency in the air.

"What's going on?" Shadowpaw asked as he looked around.

"I'm not sure," Sandstorm replied, her gaze scanning the camp. "But I have a feeling that something important is happening."

Fireheart called out to Sandstorm, his tail twitching urgently. "Sandstorm, I need to speak with you."

Sandstorm nodded and turned to Shadowpaw. "Wait here. I'll be back soon."

Shadowpaw watched as Sandstorm disappeared with Fireheart. He wondered what they were talking about, but he knew better than to eavesdrop.

As he waited, his mind began to think of Shadepaw again. He shook his head to clear it as Sandstorm reappeared and called out to him. "Shadowpaw, come with me. We have a new mission."

Sandstorm led Shadowpaw towards the edge of the ThunderClan territory, where they met with Fireheart. "There have been rumors of Tigerstar and his warriors stirring up trouble, and we need to make sure our Clan is safe, so we're going back out to see. Would you like to come with us?"

Shadowpaw's ears pricked up at the mention of Tigerstar. He had heard about the former ThunderClan deputy's treachery, and he knew that he was not to be trusted. "Sure." He replied after a little hesitation.

As they made their way towards the ShadowClan border, Shadowpaw tried to keep his senses sharp. He felt distracted, and felt a pang of guilt as he turned his attention back to Sandstorm and

Fireheart.

They came across a group of ShadowClan warriors. Shadowpaw recognized one of them as Blackfoot, the deputy.

"Greetings, ThunderClan," Blackfoot meowed, his tone icy. "What brings you to our territory?"

"We're just patrolling our borders." Sandstorm replied calmly.

Blackfoot snorted, knowing already what they were up to. "Tigerstar is no longer your concern. He has taken his rightful place as leader of ShadowClan, and we will not be intimidated by your petty accusations."

Shadowpaw felt a sense of unease. He bristled his neck fur and narrowed his eyes, ready for a fight, but Sandstorm stayed calm.

"We mean no harm, Blackfoot," Sandstorm said, trying to diffuse the situation. "Like I said, we're just patrolling the borders."

Blackfoot narrowed his eyes. "We will see about that."

Fireheart's gaze narrowed and he flattened his ears, but stayed silent.

"As the deputy, you should know better than to scope around our business." Blackfoot retorted quickly. His icy gaze made way into Shadowpaw's fur and he could feel himself bristling his neck fur.

As the ShadowClan deputy disappeared into the shadows, Shadowpaw relaxed. They continued to make their way along the ShadowClan border, but Shadowpaw couldn't shake the feeling of dread that had settled in his chest. He knew that something had to be done to prevent a war between the Clans.

"Sandstorm, do you think there's any way we can prevent a conflict with ShadowClan?" Shadowpaw asked tentatively.

Sandstorm turned to look at him, her expression softening slightly. "I don't know, Shadowpaw. We'll have to wait and see what Bluestar decides. For now, all we can do is keep our Clan safe."

Shadowpaw nodded, but he couldn't help but feel frustrated. He wanted to do something... anything, to prevent a conflict.

They reached the ThunderClan camp and Shadowpaw saw that Bluestar was waiting for them.

"What happened?" She meowed curtly.

"We patrolled the ShadowClan border, but we encountered Blackfoot and some of his warriors," Sandstorm reported. "They seemed to be dismissive of us and told us that Tigerstar is no longer our concern."

Bluestar's expression hardened. "I had a feeling this would happen. We cannot let ShadowClan threaten our safety. We must prepare for an attack."

Shadowpaw tensed. He didn't want to fight, but he knew that he had to do what was necessary to protect his Clan. If they were to fight, he would have no choice but to fight ShadowClan.

As he made his way back to the apprentices' den, he began thinking of Shadepaw again. He circled around his messy nest and nestled inside, tucking his paws under his chest. *Why was Shadepaw alone sitting by the river? Was she planning to attack ThunderClan while they were sleeping?*

Chapter Six

Shadowpaw tried to sleep, but just couldn't. He kept thinking of all the possibilities that could happen to him and his Clan. He shook his head to clear it and decided that maybe a walk by himself would do him some good.

Sandstorm was already in the warriors' den. The other warriors were pretty much settled down in their nests as well. The only one up was Fireheart. He sat at the edge of camp, looking out into the distance. His ears were alerted and they twitched as sounds all around him were heard.

Shadowpaw thought of sneaking around him, but knew Fireheart's senses were very sharp and he would get caught anyways. He padded towards him and Fireheart immediately whirled around, his bright green eyes wide with alarm. Then he relaxed when he saw it was just Shadowpaw.

"Can't sleep?" Mewed Fireheart.

Shadowpaw sat down next him and wrapped his fluffy tail over his front paws. "Is Tigerstar really that dangerous as ShadowClan's leader?"

Fireheart softly sighed. "He tried to kill our leader."

Shadowpaw was rather small when Tigerstar, Tigerclaw at the time, and some rogues raided ThunderClan and tried to kill Bluestar. He didn't remember much about the old deputy, but he did know that Tigerclaw had huge claws that stuck out all the time. He was rather intimidated by him and rarely came out of the nursery when Tigerclaw was near.

"You saved her, right?"

Fireheart softly nodded his head. "Yes, but it wasn't easy. He is a strong warrior and fighter. I would not want to go into battle with

him again."

Shadowpaw sat silently, not knowing what else to say. He thought of just going, yet enjoyed sitting by Fireheart's side. He could hear Fireheart's soft breaths and it calmed him.

Fireheart glanced down at the young apprentice and he reminded him of himself when he was young and restless. "Something is troubling you." He murmured softly.

Shadowpaw looked up at Fireheart, amazed on how he could have read of his mind. He hesitated for a moment before responding. He shuffled his paws, clearly wrestling with his thoughts. "I... my mind is filled with so many thoughts, and I don't know what to do with them." He stumbled over his words and thoughts, but knew that Fireheart was wise.

"What sort of thoughts?" Fireheart now sounded worried.

"I saw Shadepaw sitting alone by the river. She seemed lost. And then when we ran into Blackfoot, it just made me worried that we would all go to war with one another." He confessed.

Fireheart closed his eyes, dipped his head and listened silently to Shadowpaw's words. Once he had finished, Fireheart opened his eyes again. "I know you're scared." He meowed, trying to sound comforting. "Bluestar will not attack anyone unless they attack first. We must be battle ready though."

"Bluestar hasn't even been down here to see what has really gone on." Shadowpaw hissed. He narrowed his eyes, frustrated that even Fireheart didn't seem to understand his feelings. *Did everyone want to fight?*

Fireheart flinched at his words. His eyes were wide, but worried for his young friend. "I know it can be hard to accept what is to come." He blinked slowly then looked out into the distance once more. "But we must follow what our leader has planned. And as of now, we must be prepared for the worst."

Shadowpaw looked over at Fireheart and he stood proud and tall.

He was glad to call him his deputy. He softly sighed then looked down at his paws and shuffled them. "I don't know if I can." He mewed, almost too softly for Fireheart to hear. "Would you mind if I took a walk outside of camp? I just need to clear my mind before dawn."

Fireheart dipped his head. "Very well. Just be back by dawn."

Shadowpaw widened his eyes in dismay. Fireheart was really about to let him leave camp unaccompanied. He bounded out of the camp entrance and through the gorse tunnel. He didn't stop until he reached Sunningrocks. He noticed his surroundings and began padding slower as he neared the river that bordered ThunderClan territory and RiverClan territory.

To his surprise he saw Shadepaw padding to the stream on the side of RiverClan. He pricked up his ears and twitched his nose in confusion. Did she want to speak to him as well?

"Hi Shadepaw." He mewed. He stood on the opposite end of the river of her.

Shadepaw alerted her ears, then relaxed once she saw it was Shadowpaw. "It's Shadepelt now." She purred, standing a little taller.

"Oh wow! That's great!"

"So what brings you over here?" Her voice was cool, but strong, as of she was suddenly weary of his presence.

"I couldn't sleep." He wanted to say more and spill out everything he was thinking, but that was all that came out of his mouth.

Shadepelt nodded, her expression turned from weary to understanding. "I expected as much." She murmured.

Shadowpaw's gaze met hers, and he mustered the courage to continue. "I can't help but think there's going to be a war between all Clans."

"Why should that surprise you?"

Shadowpaw rounded his eyes in alarm. *Did she want to fight the Clans as well?* "Because we're supposed to help one another, not constantly want to fight."

Shadepelt's eyes glimmered with dissatisfaction. "I will not just stand by the side if the Clans decide they cannot get along with another." His once soft voice became cold and harsh.

Shadowpaw sighed, a mixture of hope and frustration. "I want to honor our traditions, to protect my Clan, but I also want to find a way to bridge the gaps between the Clans. It's like I'm torn between two paths."

"Protecting your Clan is most important above all else, Shadowpaw." She softly sighed, seeing that Shadowpaw looked crushed and defeated as if he was in battle for far too long. "It's not that I don't sympathize with you, but we have our own paths to follow - our own responsibilities."

Shadowpaw looked down at his paws and shuffled them awkwardly. He wanted support from at least one cat, and the one cat he expected to be his friend, refused to help. "Well thanks for at least talking with me." He meowed softly.

He padded away, with his tail dragging behind him. Shadepelt then stood taller and shouted out to him. "Wait!" Shadowpaw turned his head and looked back at her with sad eyes. Shadepelt then continued. "I will try to help, but we'll need to keep seeing each other in secret."

Shadowpaw widened his eyes in surprise. She was willing to help him after all! "Really?" He meowed in shock. His voice was a little higher than he had expected. "I'll meet with you tomorrow night if you can make it."

Shadepelt nodded her head in agreement then bounded further into RiverClan territory and out of sight. Shadowpaw softly sighed and watched her leave. He felt relieved that at least someone was on his side. Though she was a RiverClan cat, he knew they would be able to at least make the two Clans listen to them.

Chapter Seven

Fireheart and Waterlily exchanged worried glances, their attempts to reach out to Bluestar falling on deaf ears. The weight of the situation settled heavily on their shoulders.

Fireheart's voice carried a mix of frustration and concern. "I can't believe she's shutting us out like this. Bluestar has always been a strong leader, but lately, it feels like she's slipping away from us. We can't just stand by and watch our Clan suffer."

Waterlily's eyes reflected a mix of sadness and determination. "I agree, Fireheart. Bluestar's refusal to listen puts the Clan in danger. Perhaps you should lead us."

Fireheart widened his eyes in alarm. "Me?" His voice was sharp.

Waterlily dipped her head. "You are our deputy. You have the power to change the minds of our warriors." Fireheart softened his eyes, but he was still worried. Waterlily took a step forward and touched her nose to his cheek. "You're going to be a great leader." She purred.

Later that night Waterlily padded out of her den and noticed Shadowpaw sneaking out. She watched him leave and sat in silence with narrowed eyes. Even though she did not raise him, she felt obligated to still watch over him.

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Dawn finally came and she saw Shadowpaw padding back into camp. She approached him with a determined expression, her voice tinged with concern. "Shadowpaw, I've noticed you sneaking out of camp each night, and it's not safe. What are you doing?"

Shadowpaw's eyes darted away, avoiding Waterlily's gaze. "It's none of your business. I have my reasons, and I don't need you getting involved."

Waterlily's concern deepened, her voice pleading. "Shadowpaw, as the medicine cat, it is my duty to look after the well-being of every cat in the Clan, including you. Whatever you're doing, it's risky. You could get hurt, or worse. Please, listen to reason."

Shadowpaw's frustration grew, and his voice held a hint of defiance. "I don't need your guidance, Waterlily. I'm old enough to make my own choices. You don't understand what I'm going through, what I'm trying to accomplish."

Waterlily's eyes softened, her tone gentle yet firm. "Shadowpaw, I may not be your mother, but I still care about you. Your safety matters to me. The path you're taking could lead to trouble, and I don't want to see you hurt."

Shadowpaw's gaze hardened, his tone unyielding. "You don't understand, Waterlily. This is something I have to do. I have my reasons, and I won't share them with you. It's for the good of the Clan, even if you can't see it."

Waterlily's eyes filled with a mixture of concern and disappointment. "Shadowpaw, secrecy and defiance will only bring mistrust among the Clan. You're shutting out the support and guidance that can help you."

Shadowpaw's expression remained resolute, his voice cold. "I don't need your guidance. I know what I'm doing. Just let me be."

Waterlily's voice softened, her eyes pleading with him, yet her voice aS stern. "You're young, and there is so much you still have to learn. The choices you make now will shape your future. Please, reconsider your actions and let me help you."

Shadowpaw's gaze wavered for a moment, a flicker of uncertainty crossing his face. But then, he hardened his resolve and turned away from Waterlily. "I've made up my mind, Waterlily. I won't change it. I'm sorry, but this is something I have to do."

With that, Shadowpaw slipped away into the shadows, leaving Waterlily standing there, her heart heavy with worry. She knew she couldn't force him to listen, but she couldn't help but fear the

consequences of his actions. All she could do now was pray to StarClan that he would find his way back safely, and that the path he had chosen wouldn't bring harm to himself or their Clan.

She padded back into the medicine den full with regret. *Should I have let him go?* She shook her head as if to clear it. Letting him go would only have gotten worse. She pleaded with her mind to think with ease, but she couldn't.

She looked back out into the distance from inside the den and softly sighed. She decided to just follow him instead. She had some sneaking skills. Waterlily followed Shadowpaw's scent all the way up to Sunningrocks. It then mingled a bit with the scent of RiverClan and herbs. Was he meeting up with a RiverClan cat in ThunderClan? She sniffed the air, then opened her jaws to taste the air.

She could smell Shadowpaw, but he wasn't in ThunderClan. She looked across the river and saw a flicker of green eyes just beyond some brambles. No. This can't be. She shook her head again to clear it as if she was hoping this was all a bad dream. But it wasn't. She padded a little closer and pricked her ears, thinking maybe she could hear some of their words. She could hear faint mews, but she couldn't make out what they were saying. Shadowpaw was speaking calmly to a RiverClan cat.

The RiverClan she-cat was unfamiliar to Waterlily, with her sleek fur and fluid movements indicating her agility and grace. Waterlily's instincts as a medicine cat urged her to approach with caution, to learn more about this unexpected connection between Shadowpaw and the RiverClan cat.

Her mind raced with possibilities, contemplating the motives behind their interactions. Had Shadowpaw developed a friendship with Shadepelt? Or was there something more significant at play? Waterlily couldn't ignore the fact that Shadowpaw's actions were becoming increasingly concerning, and the involvement of a RiverClan cat only heightened her apprehension.

But now, she had to uncover the truth on why he was meeting up with her. She then remembered the feelings she had for Littlecloud

and how hard it was love someone else from a different Clan. She knew that if Shadowpaw loved Shadepelt, they would never be able to be together, just like her and Littlecloud weren't able to.

She took a deep sigh and padded back to camp unnoticed. Her mind racing even more with questions, she wondered if sleep was even an option. She tried to close her eyes to sleep, but found herself staring at the den walls, lost in thought. She then began thinking of Littlecloud once more and his bright blue eyes staring back at her.

Chapter Eight

Shadowpaw and Shadepelt found themselves in their familiar meeting spot, hidden away from prying eyes. The tension between their Clans weighed heavily on their minds, and they knew that finding a resolution was crucial to prevent further conflict.

Shadepelt spoke first. Her voice was soft and calming. "RiverClan has been suffering as of late. Tigerstar tried to make us go to his to side and join him, but Crookedstar refused. If we don't do something fast, we'll be in battle soon."

Shadowpaw widened his eyes in alarm. "Why would he want to rule two Clans?"

"He probably wants to rule all four." Shadepelt observed.

Shadowpaw narrowed his eyes. "He better not. Bluestar wouldn't dare follow him. She would rather see him dead."

"He has nine lives. He wouldn't die easily. I hear that leaders come back stronger after they lose a life." Shadepelt sat down and wrapped her scrawny tail over her front paws.

"Fireheart knows him best. He was just an apprentice when he found out about his ways. Waterlily was on to him as well." Shadowpaw went on. "I knew Tigerstar for a little bit, but we never spoke."

"He's fox-hearted, that what's he is." Hissed Shadepelt.

Shadowpaw narrowed his eyes as he thought of Tigerstar running his Clan as well when Bluestar is the rightful leader of ThunderClan. "We must find a way to rid this conflict." He looked up and saw the sun beginning to shine through the mountains far into the distance. "Next time we meet, let's have all the information we need about one another - our strengths, weaknesses, and things about ShadowClan."

Shadepelt swiftly nodded her head then bounded off towards RiverClan camp. Then she stopped and turned to face him. "Don't forget to roll in some mint leaves or mouse bile before going back to ThunderClan." Then she bounded off again into the distance.

As the first rays of dawn painted the sky in hues of gold, Shadowpaw slipped back into ThunderClan camp, his paws treading lightly on the familiar ground. He had managed to return unnoticed. The night's conversation with Shadepelt still echoed in his mind, but he pushed it aside, determined to focus on his training. Though he felt tired and exhausted, he knew that Sandstorm counted on him to focus.

As Shadowpaw joined Sandstorm for their training session, Sandstorm couldn't help but notice the distant look in her apprentice's eyes. She flicked her tail and spoke in a concerned tone. "Shadowpaw, is everything alright? You seem distracted this morning."

Shadowpaw's ears perked up, snapping back to the present. He met Sandstorm's gaze and forced a smile. "Oh, it's nothing, Sandstorm. Just had a lot on my mind, but I'm ready to train."

Sandstorm studied him for a moment, her amber eyes searching for any signs of the turmoil he seemed to be hiding. She nodded slowly. "Very well, Shadowpaw. Let's focus on honing your hunting skills today. We'll start by practicing stalking techniques. They could use some more work."

As they ventured into the undergrowth, Sandstorm observed Shadowpaw's movements closely. She could sense his mind drifting away at times, his attention wavering. It eyes flickered and he seemed down. But she knew that addressing may only make him upset. She pushed back the urge to ask anymore questions and moved on with the hunting training.

Sandstorm stopped and Shadowpaw lifted his muzzle and sniffed the air. The crisp scent of prey filled his nostrils, heightening his senses.

Sandstorm paused, her tail held high in a signal for Shadowpaw to

do the same. "Watch and learn." Sandstorm whispered, her eyes fixed on a rather large mouse grazing in a nearby patch of grass. She demonstrated the crouch, her body low to the ground, muscles coiled like springs. With slow and deliberate movements, she crept forward, every step calculated to minimize noise.

Shadowpaw watched her in silence and followed after her, trying his best to mimic her every step. Together, they inched closer to the oblivious mouse. As they approached, Sandstorm shot Shadowpaw a nod, silently urging him to make his move. Shadowpaw's heart quickened with anticipation. He focused his gaze on the mouse, visualizing every muscle in his body tensing for the perfect pounce.

With a burst of energy, Shadowpaw propelled himself forward, claws unsheathed, aiming to pin it down. But the mouse, startled by his sudden movement, scurried away in a flash and into a small hole too small for a cat to go in. Shadowpaw's landed on empty ground, his paws hitting the grassy lands. A flash of frustration burned in his eyes.

Sandstorm quickly padded over to him. "Don't worry. You'll have better luck next time. Great stalking moves by the way!" She praised. "You hesitated on your pounce a little. I think you would have got it if you didn't." She continued.

"Thanks." Shadowpaw felt pleased of his mentor's approval and advice, but he still felt tired from his meeting with Shadepelt. He wanting nothing more than to just curl up into his nest and sleep.

Sandstorm continued his training, practicing different hunting techniques throughout the day. Sandstorm taught Shadowpaw the art of scenting prey, how to track their movements by deciphering the slightest traces left behind. Shadowpaw tried his hardest to keep his attention locked on what his mentor was telling him and showing him.

With each lesson, Shadowpaw's skills sharpened, his instincts honed. Sandstorm provided guidance and corrections, pushing him to become stronger in his abilities.

As the sun began its descent, casting an orange glow over the forest,

Sandstorm called an end to the training session. Shadowpaw's muscles ached, but a sense of accomplishment filled his chest. Though he did feel quite relieved that the training was finally over.

"You did well today, Shadowpaw." Sandstorm commended, her voice tinged with pride. "Your determination and progress are praiseworthy. Keep practicing, and soon you'll be a formidable hunter."

Shadowpaw's gratitude swelled within him as he dipped his head respectfully. "Thank you, Sandstorm. I'm fortunate to have you as my mentor. I'll continue to give my best."

Sandstorm's eyes softened, a gentle smile gracing her features. "Remember, Shadowpaw, training is not just about the physical skills. It's also about loyalty, discipline, and finding the balance between your personal desires and the needs of the Clan."

Shadowpaw nodded, the weight of his secret pressing on his conscience. He knew Sandstorm's words held deeper meaning, a reminder to stay true to his Clan even as his heart pulled him elsewhere. He wanted to tell her everything about Shadepelt and what they both wanted to do, but he was scared it might make things complex. He pushed back the thoughts and followed Sandstorm back to camp.

As they made their way back to camp, a sense of friendship settled between them.The training session had not only improved Shadowpaw's skills but also deepened the bond between them. Shadowpaw felt grateful for Sandstorm's guidance and wisdom, vowing to uphold the values of ThunderClan as he navigated the complexities of his own desires and loyalties. *One day.* He thought. *I may tell her, but now it should remain a secret.*

Chapter Nine

As the sun rose, Waterlily emerged from her den, her amber eyes bright with determination. Her first duty was to check on the herb store, ensuring that they were well stocked and organized. With a brisk pace, Waterlily headed towards the herb-laden shelves they had inside the den, the scent of various plants and roots filling her senses.

She carefully inspected each herb, making mental notes of what needed replenishing. Luckily almost all the herbs were fully stocked. Catmint was surprisingly among them. But what she lacked the most was horsetail and that was needed for infections and bleeding. Waterlily then bounded towards the elder's den and checked on them. They were all asleep. She frowned, thinking they would be awake, but shrugged it off and padded up the ravine and out the gorse tunnel.

Waterlily sighed in disappointment as she surveyed the barren patches where horsetail once flourished. Determined to find them, she decided to venture beyond ThunderClan's territory and seek assistance from WindClan. They always have horsetail.

Waterlily set off towards WindClan camp, her paws carrying her swiftly through the familiar forest. Upon reaching the WindClan border, she paused to catch her breath, knowing that crossing into another Clan's territory was a delicate matter.

As she approached WindClan camp, her presence was detected by a WindClan warrior. He was a brown tabby tom. She recognized him from the Gatherings, but couldn't think of his name. The warrior bounded towards their leader's den. Tallstar rose to his paws and followed his warrior back to Waterlily. His eyes were soft, but she could tell that he was weary of her presence. "What brings you to WindClan camp?" He meowed cooly.

Waterlily lowered her head in respect as she spoke. "I just want to speak with Barkface is all."

"Barkface is out collecting herbs." Meowed a she-cat from a distance as she padded over to them.

"When will he return?" Asked Waterlily, mildly concerned that she would have to stay with WindClan until nightfall.

"We don't know, but he left a while ago. He should be back soon." The she-cat paused for a moment. "I'm Tawnyfur, by the way." She added, purring.

"Nice to meet you, Tawnyfur. I believe I've see you at the Gatherings."

Tawnyfur let out a purr of amusement and nodded her head, swiftly. "Most likely."

"Well, you may wait here if you like until Barkface returns." Meowed Tallstar, though he wasn't really wanting a ThunderClan cat in their camp. "Help yourself to some fresh-kill. We caught quite a bit just before sunhigh."

Waterlily looked over at their fresh-kill pile. It was piled up pretty high and her mouth watered for something to eat, but she decided it was best to wait till she got back into her own camp. "No thanks. I can just wait here until he gets back." She purred, plopping down and wrapping her fluffy tail over her front paws.

"Very well." Meowed Tallstar, then he padded up onto the ledge to watch over his Clan as they prepared for the evening patrols. Waterlily watched a few warriors come and go from camp and it seemed like Barkface was taking his grand old time in collecting his herbs.

Then finally she heard a familiar voice. "Waterlily. What are you doing here?" He meowed, clearly in shock.

The pile of herbs he had gotten were between his paws. Waterlily could smell the potent scent of marigold and catmint. There was also some horsetail and comfrey sitting in the pile. Waterlily looked up at him with a bit sadness in her eyes. "I was hoping you had some horsetail to spare, but I see you have some that you gathered,

so I take that you needed some as well."

"I can give you some if you need it?" He meowed, tilting his head a bit to the side.

"No. I don't want to take the supplies you may need. Perhaps RiverClan will have some. I can ask on my way back to ThunderClan."

Barkface dipped his head, and watched as Waterlily bounded out of their camp. As she departed WindClan's territory, Waterlily's paws guided her towards RiverClan, where the river and its lush surroundings promised the potential for finding the herb she sought.

The familiar scent of RiverClan's territory greeted her as she neared their camp. She could smell the potent scent of watermint as she padded into the camp. She padded cautiously inside, knowing that they may not be too pleased by a ThunderClan cat wondering into their camp.

Upon her arrival, Waterlily was met by Leapardfoot, the RiverClan deputy, who recognized her as the ThunderClan medicine cat. Leopardfoot regarded her with curiosity, wondering about the purpose of her visit.

"Greetings, Waterlily." She meowed with a slight nod. "What brings you to RiverClan's territory?"

Waterlily taken back by her greeting instead of their normal hostility, she dipped her head respectively to the deputy. "I come in peace, I promise. I just wish to speak with Mudfur, if I may?"

Leopardfoot swiftly nodded and flicked her tail toward Mudfur's den. It was coded with moss and ivy all around the front entrance. A familiar scent then rose to Waterlily's nostrils as she neared the medicine den. It wasn't the normal pungent smell of fish that Mudfur always smelled like. She lifted her muzzle and sniffed the air again. Then a familiar face stood a fox-lengths behind her. She turned around and saw him. It was Graystripe, Fireheart's best friend!

He raced over to her and greeted her with a purr and a rub on the cheek. "How is ThunderClan?" He meowed in a hushed tone.

"Not now, Graystripe. Right now, I must speak with Mudfur. I believe that Leopardfoot is watching me." She whispered back, trying to politely nod, but not make it obvious she wanted to talk to him as well.

"Understood." He meowed, then sat down, watching as Waterlily entered Mudfur's den.

"Mudfur?" She called out.

Mudfur pricked his ears and bristled his neck fur. He looked over at Waterlily, then relaxed. "Oh, it's nice to see you over here on this side for a change." He meowed with a slight nod.

Waterlily returned the nod and sat down, wrapping her tail over her front paws. "I love what you've done! It's a beautiful entrance."

"Thanks. It began growing like that." He purred. "So what can I help you with?"

"I am need of some horsetail. Where I normally get my stock, it has depleted and I'm not sure why."

"You mean it hasn't grown back in Sunningrocks?" His voice then got dry with concern.

"Correct."

Mudfur looked into the distance as if he was thinking of something to say - whether he wanted to spare some of his or not. "I have plenty on our end. I can take you there. You'll be halfway to ThunderClan territory by then and we'll part ways."

Waterlily nodded with agreement. "Thanks." She purred. "But first, do you mind if I speak with Graystripe for a bit before going?"

"Do whatever you have to do." He mewed, then began sorting the rest of the herbs that was not in his stock yet.

Waterlily padded outside of the medicine den and found Graystripe still sitting there. She was half surprised that he waited for her. She greeted him again with a soft purr then sat down just a tail-length in front of him. "Fireheart misses you." She began.

"I miss him." His meow was rougher than she had remembered. She expected it was probably from age. They were growing up pretty fast. Graystripe's once fluffed out fur was now sleek and matted to his body, which now made him look skinny.

"We are all worried about Bluestar." she mumbled, hoping no one was eavesdropping.

"She's still on edge about Tigerstar?" He sounded surprised.

"Of course she is. He tried to kill her, remember?" She bristled her fur, then quickly flattened it before anyone realized that she was suddenly raising her voice in anger.

"Of course. I had forgotten that part."

Waterlily wanted to smack him across the face with her paw. *How could he not remember his own leader almost getting killed by their own deputy?* Then she remembered that he was constantly distracted from the Clan because he was seeing Silverstream at the time.

Chapter Ten

Mudfur led Waterlily out of camp and to a rather swampy place up stream. She could see Sunningrocks just across the river and she knew the way home from there, but first she had to get the horsetail. Mudfur stopped at a small swamp. It was a pond that had a swarm of insects and looked as if all RiverClan cats used it for making dirt.

"This is where we keep the supply of horsetail. There is plenty of it. Feel free to take as much as you need."

Waterlily nodded her thanks and began picking a good amount. As she made her way back to ThunderClan territory, the horsetail safely held in her mouth, her senses keenly attuned to her surroundings. The familiar sights and scents of the forest brought a sense of comfort, but her attention was suddenly captured by an unexpected sight.

Nearing Sunningrocks, Waterlily's eyes widened as she spotted Shadowpaw and Shadepelt engaged in conversation. She narrowed her eyes in anger and disgust. He vowed to not sneak out again. She felt furious that he went and did it anyway. She crept a few tail-lengths closer and listened in on their conversation, hiding behind a bramble bush. The brambles clung to her thick fur, but she didn't care. She wanted to hear what they were saying.

"Our patrols follow a pattern, and our hunting grounds are well-defined. If ShadowClan were to strike at the right time and place, it could disrupt our prey supply and cause chaos." Shadowpaw's voice wavered, the weight of his words settling upon him.

"Let's just hope that Tigerstar doesn't do that." Meowed Shadepelt.

Waterlily's claws dug into the earth as her frustration grew. Shadowpaw was giving out crucial information to another Clan cat. She wanted to race over there and stop him, but if she was caught spying, Shadowpaw would hate her forever. She narrowed her eyes,

then silently slipped away back to camp.

She paced inside the medicine den, wondering what to say or do to Shadowpaw. If she said something, she might jeopardize her friendship with him, but if she didn't, she may jeopardize her whole Clan. She softly sighed then stopped pacing as she saw Shadowpaw approaching back into camp. She flexed her shoulders, but dug her claws into the ground to make herself secure in case she actually went lunging at him.

Shadowpaw looked over at her as he passed by. Waterlily straightened up and pretended that she was counting something small like poppy seeds that were hard to see from a distance. Just as she looked back up, he was gone. She stopped counting and with a heavy heart, she made the difficult decision not to approach him. Instead, she resolved to closely observe his actions, making sure he remained loyal to ThunderClan and did not further endanger the Clan with his secret meetings.

The more she observed Shadowpaw's actions and listened to his conversations with Shadepelt, the more she became convinced that there was something sinister at play. The thought of Shadowpaw being manipulated by Tigerstar, using their secrets to undermine ThunderClan's safety, sent shivers down her spine.

Waterlily then padded into Bluestar's den. Bluestar was sound asleep and woke up with a startle. "Waterlily." She meowed, panting from fear. "I thought you were... never mind..." She shook her head as if to clear it. "What can I do for you?" She added quickly.

"I want to go to the Moonstone." Waterlily confessed rather quickly.

"Now? It won't be moon high when you get there."

"I know." Waterlily dipped her head in respect. "I plan on going there once the moon rises again. I must speak with StarClan. I just..." She paused, wondering what all she could tell Bluestar without worrying her. "have a lot on my mind and need some answers."

"Very well." Bluestar meowed, then laid her head back down and

closed her eyes to sleep.

Waterlily left in silence and padded back to her den. She sat just outside the entrance and looked up at silverpelt. Her amber eyes glittered golden as the sun rose just over the trees.

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Waterlily paced anxiously in the medicine den, her eyes constantly darting toward the entrance. The anticipation had her on edge, and every passing moment felt like an eternity. She yearned for the moon to rise, casting its silver glow upon the forest and signaling the time for her to leave camp. The sun, seemingly relentless, continued its slow descent across the sky. Waterlily found herself glancing at the shadows cast by the trees, hoping they would lengthen and signal the approaching dusk.

Impatiently, she watched as the sun dipped lower, its warm golden rays fading into hues of orange and pink. The world around her seemed to hold its breath, as if even the air knew that something significant was about to take place. Yet, time seemed to drag on, prolonging her restlessness and increasing her anticipation. Waterlily tried to distract herself by organizing the herbs in the den, meticulously arranging them in neat piles and checking their freshness. She even attempted to meditate, seeking solace in the calming rhythm of her own breath. But her thoughts kept wandering back to what all Shadowpaw said to Shadepelt.

As the sky finally transformed into a canvas of twilight hues, Waterlily's heart skipped a beat. The first glimmers of the moon began to appear, casting a faint glow over the treetops. It was a sign that the long-awaited night was finally arriving. She padded out of her den and trotted up the ravine with ease. She scrambled through the gorse tunnel and she was finally on her way to the Moonstone.

The forest was shrouded in an eerie stillness as Waterlily navigated the familiar path, her paws padding softly against the leaf-strewn ground. The moonlight filtered through the canopy above, casting ethereal patterns on the forest floor. It was a solemn and sacred journey, one undertaken by medicine cats throughout the ages.

Waterlily's thoughts swirled in her mind, weighed down by the secrets she had discovered. She couldn't ignore the growing unease within her, the knowledge of the potential danger lurking in the shadows of ThunderClan. She felt a deep responsibility to protect her Clan, but she also grappled with the bond of friendship that had formed between her and Shadowpaw. There was a pale glow beckoning her forward. She entered the sacred space and took a moment to offer her silent prayers to StarClan.

She laid down and touched her nose to the cold stone and wrinkled her nose from the shock. She then closed her eyes and let StarClan take over her sight and mind.

"Welcome young one." The familiar voice of Spottedleaf sounded just a tail-length in front of her.

Waterlily opened her eyes and saw Spottedleaf standing there. Her coat was brighter than ever. She raced over to her and rubbed her flank. "It's good to see you again." She purred.

"You have many questions." Spottedleaf mewed, sitting down and wrapping her tail over her front paws.

"I am very concerned for Shadowpaw." She began.

Spottedleaf blinked slowly, letting her amber eyes sparkle from the rays of the sun above them. She listened to Waterlily talk about what Shadowpaw was doing and her worries for him. She nodded a few times in agreement, then responded once Waterlily was finished. "Secrets are delicate threads that can unravel trust and bring chaos. What does your heart tell you, Waterlily?"

Waterlily felt like she had skipped a beat. "I fear for my Clan's safety. Shadowpaw may not fully comprehend the danger he's putting us in. Yet, I also feel a sense of duty to protect him as his..." She paused for a moment. "As his mother in a way. I am torn between loyalty to my Clan and the bond I share with him."

"The path of a medicine cat is one of wisdom and discernment. Sometimes, tough decisions must be made for the sake of the Clan's well-being. Trust your instincts and choose what is best for

ThunderClan."

Waterlily dipped her in thanks for the knowledge, but she felt like nothing was being answered. Then she thought of what his destiny could be and maybe they knew anything about it yet. "What about Shadowpaw's destiny? Have you been able to understand anything about that?"

"The threads of destiny are complex and intertwined, woven with purpose. Each cat has their own part to play, and sometimes, the unexpected brings forth the greatest change."

"But what about his purpose? What lies ahead of him?"

"His path is uncertain, yet, in his struggles and choices, he will find his true strength. He carries within him the potential to become a guiding light or a harbinger of darkness. It is through his actions that his destiny will be shaped." She sounded as if other cats joined her as she spoke. Her voice faded into the light and then she was gone completely. Waterlily was alone once more.

Chapter Eleven

The Gathering was in full swing as Shadowpaw and his Clan arrived, their footsteps muffled by the soft earth beneath their paws. The air was thick with anticipation, and Shadowpaw's heart raced with a mix of excitement and anxiety. He glanced around, taking in the sight of the other Clans gathered under the moonlit sky.

Tigerstar's imposing figure caught Shadowpaw's attention as he perched on the highest branch, surveying the gathering Clans with an air of superiority. He felt a shiver run down his spine as their gazes briefly locked. There was something unsettling about Tigerstar's piercing amber eyes, a hidden darkness that made Shadowpaw's fur stand on end.

Bluestar leaped up onto the branch and Tigerstar's gaze met with hers. There was silence in the air as she sat down and slowly shifted her gaze to the rest of the clearing.

Tigerstar cleared his throat then began to speak. "While I have everyone's attention." He began, with a grin. "I come with an offer, a chance for ThunderClan to join RiverClan and WindClan in an alliance. Together, we can protect ourselves from the threats that lurk in the forest."

Bluestar's fur bristled. "What threats?" She hissed.

Leaning forward, his voice dripping with calculated menace. "The threat of weakness, Bluestar. ThunderClan's numbers are dwindling, and your resources are strained. Without support, you leave yourselves vulnerable to attacks from rival Clans. Join us, and together we will ensure our survival."

Bluestar stood taller, her voice wavering as she spoke, but she kept her gaze on Tigerstar. "ThunderClan has faced challenges before. We will not bow to ShadowClan's dominance. Our loyalty lies with our Clan, not in deceptive alliances."

Tigerstar's eyes narrowed, his expression turning cold. "You will regret that, Bluestar." He hissed.

Shadowpaw gulped for air, and realized that it was a little louder than he had intended. A few eyes turned to him, but they quickly went back to the ShadowClan leader.

"ThunderClan will pay the price for your foolishness." Tigerstar continued, then leaped down from his perch, disappearing into the shadows. The tension in the clearing lingered, and whispers of concern spread among the gathered cats. Was the Gathering finished? The same question began drifting around from one cat to another, wondering if the Gathering would really end on such a bad note.

As Shadowpaw and his Clan made their way back to ThunderClan territory, Bluestar's words echoed in his mind. The weight of their refusal to join the alliance settled upon his shoulders, intertwining with the knowledge he had shared with Shadepelt. Doubt and worry gnawed at him. Would a battle of the Clan really come to be? He shook his head to clear it then sprinted on ahead to catch up with Ashpaw and Fernpaw.

"What did ya think about that meeting?" Whispered Fernpaw.

Shadowpaw hesitated. He wanted to pour out all that he knew, but he shook his head and decided not to. "Kind of harsh, but short." He finally mewed.

Fernpaw was bursting with excitement as she pushed past the other warriors. She was almost first to go through the gorse tunnel. Shadowpaw, bringing up rear, with Fireheart just behind him, padded through the gorse tunnel with ease and was glad to be back in camp. Though he longed to go see Shadepelt one more time.

Shadowpaw felt tired and exhausted. Most of his nights were filled with talking to Shadepelt, but this time, he would be sleeping the whole night. He curled up into his nest, which was freshly made and quickly closed his eyes to sleep. His mind haunted him with his secret meetings with Shadepelt. Questions began pondering into his thoughts even as he slept through the night. *Should I confront*

Shadepelt and put an end to our secret conversations? But then doubt and uncertainty clouded his judgment.

He opened his eyes to a world that he recognized, but then realized that it was not his own territory. He was in RiverClan territory. He lifted his head and sniffed the air. He was surrounded by the scents of RiverClan: fish, musk and water. He felt a pang of joy as he started to pad deeper into RiverClan territory.

A figure appeared before him, a shimmering presence that exuded wisdom and grace. It was a cat from StarClan, her form radiant and her voice echoing with celestial wisdom. The StarClan cat approached Shadowpaw, her eyes filled with concern and urgency. "Shadowpaw, you mustn't be here."

Shadowpaw did not recognize the she-cat, but her voice kept him calm. "Why? It's only a dream." He retorted.

"You must listen to my words. You are not safe here in RiverClan territory. There is danger that lurks, especially in the form of shadows."

"Shadows?" his voice then sounded dry.

"Someone may not be who she seems. She holds secrets and hidden motives that could jeopardize the delicate balance between the Clans. Her loyalty may lie elsewhere, and you must be cautious." The she-cat looked up into the moonlit sky and softly sighed. Then she looked back down at Shadowpaw. His expression was motionless and unreadable.

"Shadepelt is my friend." He then understood what the StarClan she-cat meant. "I will not let you tell me who I can't trust!" He added, hissing furiously.

"Very well." Meowed the she-cat. Her sudden icy cold mew, made Shadowpaw shiver with unease. "The path you walk is fraught with danger." She added, then sprinted away into the distance.

Confused by his dream, Shadowpaw woke up with a startle. *Who was the StarClan she-cat?* He shook his head to clear. *Not a concern*

of mine. He softly growled to himself. Then he began thinking of Shadepelt once more. *If she truly has disloyal intentions, she would have done something by then.* That's what he kept telling himself. He wasn't sure if he truly believed what he thought, but it kept his mind at peace... at least for the time being.

Chapter Twelve

Waterlily's concern for Bluestar deepened as she observed the growing tensions among the Clans. Bluestar's resolute refusal to join alliances with ShadowClan was a decision that both relieved and worried Waterlily. While she understood the importance of maintaining ThunderClan's independence, she also recognized the looming threat of impending battles.

Each day brought with it an air of uncertainty, as the forest seemed to hold its breath, waiting for the storm to break. Waterlily could sense the tension building, like the calm before a fierce storm, and she knew that they had to be prepared for whatever challenges lay ahead.

She diligently attended to her duties as the medicine cat, gathering and organizing herbs, tending to the injured and sick, and offering support and guidance to her Clanmates. But her thoughts frequently strayed to the safety of ThunderClan and the well-being of its leader.

Waterlily longed for a moment alone with Bluestar, a chance to share her concerns and offer her perspective. She believed that ThunderClan should remain united and strong, but she also understood the risks of isolation in the face of a gathering storm. However, the weight of her duty as a medicine cat prevented her from speaking out openly.

As she gazed at Bluestar from afar, Waterlily couldn't help but feel a mixture of admiration and worry. Bluestar's determination was unyielding, and her commitment to her Clan was unwavering. Yet, Waterlily couldn't shake the nagging feeling that ThunderClan might need allies in the battles to come.

Waterlily took a deep breath, steeling herself for the conversation ahead. She made her way towards Bluestar's den, her paws feeling heavier with each step. The fate of ThunderClan weighed heavily on her shoulders, and she knew that convincing Bluestar was crucial.

As she entered the den, she found Bluestar perched on a mossy ledge, her gaze focused and distant. Waterlily approached respectfully, dipping her head in greeting.

"Bluestar, may I speak with you?" She asked, her voice steady despite the urgency pulsing through her veins.

Bluestar's eyes flickered towards Waterlily. "What is it?" she responded, her tone tinged with a hint of impatience.

Waterlily took a moment to gather her thoughts, choosing her words carefully. "I understand your concerns about alliances, but I fear that ThunderClan is not fully prepared for the battles that lie ahead."

Bluestar's gaze hardened, her voice firm. "ThunderClan has faced countless challenges before, Waterlily. We have always stood strong on our own. I will not risk the safety and independence of our Clan by forming alliances with others."

"But you're willing to risk our Clan in battle?" Hissed Waterlily. She felt even more furious now and dug her claws into the ground to keep her from pouncing onto Bluestar.

Bluestar's ears raised up in alarm as if she noticed Waterlily's sudden change in tone and stance. "I am always thinking of our Clan." She meowed harshly. "I have been leader for longer than you were born."

Waterlily then just dipped her head in respect. "Sorry, Bluestar. I understand." Then she padded away with her tail dragging behind her.

As night fell and the moon rose high in the sky, Waterlily found a moment of relief. She stepped outside the medicine den, gazing up at the shimmering stars above. The twinkling lights reminded her of the countless cats who had walked the path before her, their spirits guiding her in her role as a medicine cat.

With a quiet prayer to StarClan, Waterlily sought their strength and guidance. She knew the path ahead would be challenging, but she

was determined to do everything in her power to protect ThunderClan and its warriors.

As she turned to re-enter the medicine den, Waterlily's eyes caught a glimpse of Shadowpaw nearby, his gaze distant and troubled. Concern etched across her features, she made a mental note to check on him later. There was something about the young apprentice that stirred her instincts, a nagging feeling that he held a pivotal role in ThunderClan's future.

Then she saw that he snuck out of camp once more. Her concern for him deepened. The meetings he kept having with Shadepelt was worrying her. She shook her head as if to clear it, then padded to her messy nest to sleep. She tucked her paws under her chest and closed her eyes tightly as if she was trying not to think of anything that made her feel uneasy.

She could feel her blood pulsing through her as she opened her eyes. She recognized the sights of StarClan's hunting grounds. She was dreaming.

"Spottedleaf?" She called out, hoping she would hear her.

A pretty tortoiseshell she-cat padded up to her and touched her nose to Waterlily's cheek. "Greetings, little one. Shadowpaw troubles you."

Waterlily flicked her tail uneasily. "He does. Should I not be worried?"

Spottedleaf shrugged her shoulders. "I am not sure what he is up to, but this is not an infatuation. I believe it could be something we all fear." She stopped speaking and looked into the distance as if she was suddenly distracted.

Waterlily widened her eyes. "And what is it that you fear?" Her voice was strained with alarm and fear.

Spottedleaf shook her head to clear it then looked blankly at Waterlily. "We fear that Shadepelt is not on his side. RiverClan has already agreed to form an alliance with ShadowClan. I fear that

Shadepelt doesn't have good intentions."

"Shadowpaw is naive." Whispered Waterlily, half to herself. She looked down at her paws for a quick moment, then looked back at Spottedleaf with the same fear in her eyes that Spottedleaf held. "Shadowpaw will not listen to me. Is it possible to send him a sign?"

"I am not sure. But maybe I could try to give him a sign. We just have to hope that he notices the sign that we give him."

Waterlily nodded her head in agreement. Spottedleaf then padded away and faded away into the distance. Once she was gone, Waterlily turned back, then opened her eyes. She was back in ThunderClan territory and in the medicine den. Her troubles weren't solved, but perhaps the sign StarClan sends Shadowpaw will help him to understand she was right about Shadepelt all along.

Chapter Thirteen

Shadowpaw laid in his nest for once. He felt relieved that he was able to finally sleep. Sneaking out was serious business, but he thought it to be necessary. He closed his eyes to sleep and began to dream rather quickly.

He found himself standing on the edge of a vast river, its waters shimmering with an otherworldly glow. Above him, the stars twinkled brightly, their celestial forms casting an ethereal light upon the scene.

In the midst of this astral dreamscape, a figure materialized before Shadowpaw. It was a majestic StarClan warrior, their pelt dappled with stardust and their eyes gleaming with wisdom. The warrior's voice resonated through the air, carrying an urgent message. He did not recognize the dead warrior, but he knew StarClan was a great deal to the Clans. He padded over to the StarClan cat and could smell that it was a she-cat.

"Shadowpaw," She spoke, her voice filled with a mixture of concern and caution. "Beware the false friendship that entwines you. The darkness veils the true nature of those you trust."

The river's gentle currents seemed to rise, forming phantom claws that reached toward Shadowpaw. Her words echoed in his ears, urging him to heed himself to his feet, but he couldn't. He was stuck. He couldn't move at all. Then the river suddenly became a dark colored she-cat. Her claws were sheathed and ready for battle.

As the dream faded, and Shadowpaw awoke in the waking world, the warning from StarClan lingered in his thoughts. It weighed heavily on his conscience, a constant reminder of the potential danger that loomed in the shadows. But he decided to push back the dream.

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The very next night, he snuck out of camp once more to meet with Shadepelt. He felt a bit of confusion as he padded closer to the river. Where they normally met, Shadepelt stood a few tail-lengths behind a bramble bush. His heart began to waver with unease. His dream haunted his thoughts, but he shook his head to clear it, then padded up to Shadepelt.

Shadepelt's eyes gleamed with an intensity that sent a shiver down Shadowpaw's spine, but he pushed aside his unease, determined to maintain a sense of normalcy in their conversation.

"So, what news do you bring from ThunderClan?" Shadepelt inquired, her voice laced with a mix of curiosity and underlying purpose.

Shadowpaw took a moment to gather his thoughts, choosing his words carefully. "Bluestar remains adamant in her decision to avoid alliances with other Clans." He replied. "She believes ThunderClan can stand strong on its own."

A flicker of something unreadable passed through Shadepelt's eyes, but she nodded in understanding. "And what about their preparations for the coming battles?" She pressed.

Shadowpaw hesitated for a moment, feeling the weight of the secrets he held. "Bluestar has been organizing patrols, training warriors, and fortifying our defenses. There is a sense of readiness within the Clan, despite the tensions."

Shadepelt's gaze intensified, and Shadowpaw couldn't help but wonder what lay behind her piercing stare. "And what of their weaknesses? Their vulnerabilities?" She probed, her voice dropping to a near-whisper.

Shadowpaw's heart skipped a beat, knowing that he was treading on dangerous ground. He chose his words cautiously, trying to strike a balance between honesty and discretion. "Every Clan has its weaknesses," he replied evasively. "ThunderClan is no exception."

Shadepelt nodded thoughtfully, a glimmer of satisfaction. Shadowpaw slightly narrowed his eyes, but didn't let her know that

he suddenly became weary of telling her all the secrets.

"What are your plans for attacking Tigerstar?" Shadepelt inquired, her eyes burned with sudden excitement.

Shadowpaw blinked at her words, unable to hide his worry. But he remained resolute and tried to speak carefully. "I am not sure on those strategies yet."

Shadepelt sighed with disappointment. Shadowpaw wondered if she only asked to pay the words he said forward. He watched as her gaze looked into the distance. "We must meet later. I'll see you at the Gathering tomorrow." Then she quickly skidded away into the river. Shadowpaw watched as she swam gracefully to other side. He wanted to believe that StarClan was perhaps talking about her and her treacheries, but he didn't want to think that she would betray his trust.

Shadowpaw's paws felt heavy as he entered the familiar confines of the apprentices' den. The mossy scent embraced him, mingling with the comforting aroma of his nest. It was a place of relief, a sanctuary where he could briefly escape the weight of his secrets.

With a tired sigh, Shadowpaw settled into his nest, curling his tail around his paws and over his soft pink nose. The soft moss cushioned his body, offering comfort from the turmoil that laid in his mind. The den felt empty, even though other apprentices were surrounding him. Soft breathing was heard around him. Soft whispers of the conversation with Shadepelt replayed in his mind. The disappointment in her eyes haunted him. He wondered if he had made the right choice, if keeping ThunderClan's strategies hidden was worth the strain it put on their friendship.

As exhaustion tugged at his weary limbs, Shadowpaw's eyelids grew heavy. Sleep beckoned, offering a temporary reprieve from the complexities of his life. He closed his eyes tightly, then relaxed as he felt deep into slumber. In the embrace of sleep, he found solace, if only for a few precious moments before the dawn would awaken him to the challenges that awaited in the waking world. He would be tired. Sandstorm already suspected something, but luckily she never asked any daunting questions.

Chapter Fourteen

The moon hung high in the night sky, casting an ethereal glow upon the gathering cats assembled at Fourtrees. The atmosphere crackled with anticipation as the leaders of the Clans took their place on the high branches. Tigerstar stood tall and imposing, his amber eyes glinting with determination. His voice echoed through the clearing as he addressed the gathered cats, his words carrying an air of authority. "Tonight, I offer ThunderClan and WindClan one final chance to join our alliance," Tigerstar declared, his voice carrying a note of firmness. "RiverClan has already pledged their loyalty to us, recognizing the strength and security that comes with unity."

Waterlily gasped and widened her eyes in alarm as Tigerstar's words echoed through the clearing. A sense of unease settled deep within her, confirming her suspicions about Shadepelt. The pieces of the puzzle were slowly coming together, revealing a picture that she had feared all along. Her gaze flickered towards Shadowpaw, who stood nearby, his youthful face a mixture of confusion and concern. Waterlily's instincts told her that he was just a pawn in Shadepelt's game. Her heart ached for him, knowing the potential harm he might face if he continued to trust the RiverClan she-cat.

"Our answer remains the same, Tigerstar," Bluestar retorted, her voice laced with determination. "ThunderClan will not bow to your demands. We stand strong in our independence, ready to defend our territory and our way of life."

Tallstar nodded in agreement, his voice carrying the weight of experience. "WindClan, too, will not be swayed by empty promises." He spoke, his words resolute. "Our loyalty lies with our own Clan and the warrior code that guides us."

Tigerstar's eyes narrowed, his expression growing darker as he absorbed their defiance. The tension in the air thickened, as if a storm loomed on the horizon, ready to unleash its fury. His voice, though controlled, carried a sharp edge. "Very well." Tigerstar

hissed, his voice dripping with veiled threat. "If you refuse to join us, then be prepared for the consequences. The winds of change are blowing, and soon the Clans will be reshaped."

"Is this what all the Gathering is going to be about?" Hissed Bluestar. Her voice was sharp and stern.

Tigerstar's gaze drifted away from her blue eyes. "If you wish to speak, you may." His eyes still narrowed. He sat down, making the branch shake a bit.

The three other leaders steadied themselves. Bluestar took a small step forward and puffed out her chest as she spoke. "ThunderClan has had some troubles with the scent of RiverClan on our territory." She began. "ThunderClan has always been self-reliant and strong." Her gaze sweeping across the assembled cats. "We have faced countless challenges and emerged victorious. We will not falter in the face of this new threat."

Waterlily's heart raced as she listened to Bluestar's words. She knew the identity of the mysterious warrior who had been infiltrating ThunderClan's territory, but it was a secret she couldn't reveal just yet. The weight of the knowledge pressed heavily upon her, as she grappled with the decision of whether to disclose her suspicions to Bluestar.

As Bluestar's gaze swept across the gathered cats, searching for signs of guilt or betrayal, Waterlily's eyes locked with the leader's for a brief moment. A flicker of concern passed through Bluestar's gaze, an unspoken question that Waterlily understood all too well. Bluestar didn't know who the intruder was, but Waterlily did. A surge of conflicting emotions washed over her.

On one paw, her loyalty to ThunderClan compelled her to share the information and help protect her Clan from potential danger. Yet she feared the repercussions it could have on her friendship with Shadowpaw and the trust he had placed in her. She wrestled with the dilemma, torn between her duty as a medicine cat and her personal connections.

For now, Waterlily decided to keep her knowledge to herself. Then

she drifted her gaze over to Fireheart. He sat with a heavy weight on his shoulders. She could sense that he also knew something. Was he hiding something as well? He didn't meet Waterlily's eyes. He just kept his gaze up at Tigerstar as if he was plotting something.

The Gathering came to a close and the cats departed in their Clans, all heading home. Waterlily padded in silence as she thought about what should be said and done. She wanted to tell Bluestar everything she knew about Shadepelt, but telling her would only make things worse. Fireheart swiftly brushed past her and at that point, she knew telling him would be wise. He was the deputy of ThunderClan after all. He would know what to do!

Waterlily's paws carried her silently through the camp, her mind set on finding Fireheart. She needed to share the crucial information she had discovered about Shadepelt's true intentions. Fireheart was known for his loyalty to the Clan and his sharp instincts, and she believed he would understand the gravity of the situation.

As she approached Fireheart, she noticed him deep in conversation with Whitestorm near the warriors' den. Waterlily waited patiently for a break in their discussion before gently clearing her throat to capture their attention.

"Fireheart, may I speak with you?" She asked, her voice carrying a sense of urgency.

Fireheart lifted his head and looked at her blankly before answering. "Of course. What is it?" He sounded briefly puzzled, but quickly turned it into worry.

Waterlily took a deep breath, gathering her thoughts before she began to relay what she had discovered. "I have stumbled upon some troubling information, Fireheart. Shadepelt, a warrior from RiverClan, is involved in secret meetings with Shadowpaw."

"That's what he's been doing?" His voice sounded shocked.

Waterlily tilted her head to the side and curiosity roared through her blood. "You knew he was sneaking off?"

"I... knew he had gone off before. I let him because he said that he needed some air. I think that may have been the first night."

"How long ago was that?" Waterlily's mew was tense, almost shaking from worry.

"About a moon ago. Since the last Gathering now that I think of it."

"Who knows what information they have exchanged or what plans they may have made." Waterlily exclaimed, her voice filled with concern. "Do you have any ideas on what we should do?"

Fireheart only shook his head slowly. "I do not know. As of now, this must remain a secret until I figure out what must be done."

Waterlily dipped her head in agreement, though she didn't want to keep it a secret. She already kept it for a moon. Could she really keep it even longer? What if Shadowpaw keeps going and decides to tell Shadepelt every possible strategy they have once spoken of? They wouldn't stand a chance in battle with RiverClan or ShadowClan.

Chapter Fifteen

Bluestar's voice carried a weight of importance as she turned to Waterlily. "I have decided to go to the Moonstone tonight."

Waterlily's eyes widened with surprise and concern. She heard the urgency in Bluestar's voice, and it left her with little choice. She nodded firmly, her voice filled with determination. "Alright, but I am coming with you."

"No, you must stay. We are too vulnerable if you and I both leave." Bluestar mewed softly.

Waterlily shook her head slowly. "I am going and you can't stop me."

Bluestar sighed heavily, then dipped her head. "Very well. We leave now."

"What about the traveling herbs?"

Bluestar shook her head. "We must go now before it gets too dark. Can you make traveling herbs on our way back?"

Waterlily nodded her head softly, yet reluctantly. Bluestar twitched her tail impatiently and they were off to the Moonstone. The journey through the moonlit forest was accompanied by a profound silence, broken only by the rustling of leaves beneath their paws. The scent of the night air carried a mix of anticipation and apprehension.

As they arrived at the Moonstone, its smooth surface seemed to shimmer with a faint silver glow, reflecting the moon's radiance. Bluestar approached the sacred stone, her posture conveying reverence. Waterlily followed suit, feeling a sense of awe wash over her as she pressed her nose against the cool, polished surface. In the embrace of the Moonstone, their minds opened to the timeless realm of StarClan. The spirits of their ancestors materialized, their

forms illuminated by a mystical light.

Bluestar and Waterlily found themselves in the same dream and were rather confused. Waterlily glanced around, but the StarClan cats that surrounded them seemed to have wanted them both together.

"Bluestar, Waterlily." A familiar voice echoed through their thoughts. It was the voice of Thunder, the founder of ThunderClan. "You have come with questions?"

Waterlily started first. "Why are we both here. I only meant to get some sleep." She confessed.

"I have summoned you both here." He retorted rather quickly. Then he turned to Bluestar, his amber eyes blazing like fire. "I cannot help with what you seek, Bluestar. I do not have those kind of answers."

Waterlily was curious as to what she intended on seeking from StarClan, but she didn't press for any explanation.

"Very well. What is it that we must know?" Bluestar's mew was vague, but stern.

"There is evil in the forest. It will bring more death and destruction than the forest has ever seen before." Thunder's voice rang out all around them.

Waterlily tilted her head to the side. "What is the evil?"

"We cannot say for certain." Replied another StarClan warrior. A she-cat padded forward, showing her true identity. She had russet brown fur and bright green eyes. Waterlily did not recognize her at all. "Their nature remains shrouded in mystery, but their presence threatens the harmony of our territories." The she-cat continued.

As the dream began to fade, the StarClan warriors imparted their final words of wisdom. "Remember, together you are stronger. Embrace the power of unity and let your hearts guide you."

Waterlily and Bluestar woke up and glanced at one another with a

soft blank look. Bluestar was the first to look away and she looked exhausted. Waterlily padded slowly to her side. "What do you think it all means?"

Bluestar shook her head. "I do not know. Let's go back. Maybe they sent Fireheart something as well."

Waterlily nodded her head in agreement. StarClan spoke to him often. But she just spoke to him. He would have told her if something this serious was going to happen, right? She shook her head to clear it and followed Bluestar back to ThunderClan camp.

Bluestar and Waterlily made their way back to camp from the Moonstone. The moon's gentle radiance illuminated their way, casting elongated shadows of the trees onto the forest floor.

Waterlily's keen eyes scanned the surroundings, searching for any signs of the precious herbs that could aid them on their journey. And there, nestled amidst the undergrowth, she spotted a cluster of chamomile flowers. She raced over to the them and plucked just enough for Bluestar and herself. Bluestar took them and ate them without question, for once. Waterlily did the same and then they both continued.

As Bluestar approached Fireheart, Waterlily couldn't help but overhear snippets of their conversation. She watched them intently, her ears perked and her heart pounding with anticipation.

Fireheart's eyes widened, his gaze fixed on Bluestar after she told him what she saw in StarClan. "I had a dream." He confessed. "Something evil lurking in the forest. They whispered 'pack pack, kill kill.'"

Bluestar's expression turned grave, her fur bristling with unease. "Tigerstar perhaps?" She guessed, tilting her head to the side. "The thought sends a chill down my spine, but he has proven to be a formidable adversary in the past. I would not be surprised if he is behind this." She added softly.

Waterlily found herself holding her breath, wondering what Bluestar would think of doing. Bluestar looked up at StarClan as if

to think for a bit before continuing. "Double the patrols if we can. If anything seems off or something is misplaced, report to me immediately." She ordered.

Fireheart dipped his head in agreement, then padded off towards the fresh-kill pile with his mouse in his mouth. Waterlily took a deep breath, then straightened up once Bluestar padded towards her again. "What must I do?" She mewed, ready to do whatever Bluestar ordered her to do.

Bluestar shook her head slowly. "Just your normal duties. You have everything well stocked. I have no worries there. We are doubling the patrols, so there will be little warriors and apprentices in camp." She mewed softly.

Waterlily felt a surge of awe for her leader. Bluestar had never complimented her so much, and she almost felt embarrassed that her medicine cat duties weren't all that well stocked. But it would be the very next day. "Thank you." Purred Waterlily.

Bluestar dipped her head. "When you have time near sun high, could you fetch some new moss for the elders and apprentices? They could use some fresh nests."

"Of course." She mewed, then padded back inside the medicine den. Waterlily laid down into her messy nest and closed her eyes to sleep. Though she didn't feel tired, she didn't feel like going and getting more herbs until after sun high. For now, she would rest until then. After a while, she finally closed her eyes and began to dream rather quickly as if StarClan wanted her to know more than what they told Bluestar.

"Waterlily." Mewed a familiar voice. It was Yellowfang. Waterlily dipped her head then purred loudly. "I am glad to be talking with you again."

Yellowfang purred back, but said only words that Waterlily barely understood. "Pack, pack, kill kill." Then she faded away in the wind.

Waterlily widened her eyes. It was exactly what Fireheart had said. But what could they be?

Chapter Sixteen

"RiverClan has tried to take Sunningrocks!" Yowled a small black-and-white tom.

Shadowpaw quickly shot up in alarm and saw Swiftpaw racing into camp. Bluestar was nowhere to be seen and he quickly volunteered himself to go fight. Sandstorm nodded that they would both go and this would be a good idea to see how good his fighting is. Whitestorm, who was one of the oldest warriors, stepped up and chose warriors to come and fight. Shadowpaw raced after him as Whitestorm lead the way to Sunningrocks.

Whitestorm quickly raced up the slope and swung into action. Shadowpaw saw Fireheart look up and sigh with relief. Then he quickly went into battle.

Shadowpaw's heart pounded in his chest as he lunged at a RiverClan warrior, his instincts taking over. He fought with determination, using the skills he had learned in his training to defend his Clanmates. He raked his claws on any RiverClan cat that came near him.

Shadowpaw fought the adrenaline that suddenly came. His eyes scanning the battlefield for any sign of Shadepelt. The weight of their past secret friendship hung heavy on his heart, but in this moment, loyalty to ThunderClan prevailed. He pushed aside his thoughts and focused on defending his Clan, even if it meant fighting against her. Though he hoped that he didn't have to.

Suddenly he was caught off guard and slammed against the hard earth. He quickly got to his paws and shook out his pelt. He looked around, unaware of who had hit him. He couldn't see his opponent any where. Just as he turned around, he got knocked over again. He felt blinded by the blow. His opponent raked their claws against his back and he screeched in pain. He could feel someone on top of him, pinning him down.

He readied himself for another powerful blow, but to his relief, he felt the weight lifted off. He opened his eyes and jolted around, wide eyed, and not knowing what or who had saved him. Then he saw Sandstorm pinning down a warrior a few tail-lengths away and guessed that perhaps she was the one who had helped him. She didn't show any signs of fear as she raked her claws on his soft belly.

Sandstorm didn't look up or acknowledge him once she finished with another rake across the warrior's belly. Then she swiftly leaped over to help another warrior that was struggling.

Shadowpaw shook out his pelt and ran to help Fernpaw with another apprentice.

"We will get Sunningrocks." Hissed the RiverClan she-cat.

"You will not!" Hissed Fernpaw. She lashed a paw at her and the RiverClan apprentice swiftly ducked, somehow knowing that Fernpaw would strike. Then she striked back and Fernpaw winced with pain as she felt the blow just above her eye.

"Leave her alone, Dawnpaw!" Growled Swiftpaw. His black-and-white fur poofed out in anger, making himself look bigger.

Fernpaw did the same and hissed again. "Yeah, and leave Sunningrocks alone."

Shadowpaw readied himself to leap at Dawnpaw, but she just snorted and padded away, seeing that she was clearly outnumbered. Shadowpaw recognized the she-cat from the Gatherings, but he never spoke to her. She seemed a lot like Shadepelt when she was an apprentice.

"Thanks." Purred Fernpaw.

Swiftpaw dipped his head then padded back over to his mentor to copy more of his moves in battle.

Shadowpaw did the same, but as he padded towards Sandstorm, he caught a glimpse of Shadepelt again. She looked over at him and blinked a few times before running off again the opposite way.

"Retreat RiverClan, Retreat!" Yowled Leopardfur.

Shadowpaw sighed with relief. He didn't want to be seen letting a RiverClan warrior go without at least putting on a fight. He headed again towards Sandstorm and she turned around, purring. "So how did you like your first battle?"

Shadowpaw padded beside her as everyone headed back to camp. "I didn't fight much. I felt more like I was getting knocked around."

"You will get it. We just need to practice more. And focus more." She added, still purring.

Shadowpaw shrugged his shoulders, but he shuddered at the thought that Sandstorm noticed him not being able to focus. He snuck out so much during the night that his focus was just nonexistent for training.

Sandstorm padded the rest of the way in silence. Shadowpaw quickly padded beside her, also in silence, but he was deep in thought. He wish that he could speak with Shadepelt again, but he remembered that they are no longer speaking. Then all he could think of was that this battle was perhaps all his fault.

"Shadowpaw!" Meowed Waterlily as soon as she saw cats approaching into camp.

Her voice sounded urgent, yet she seemed content when he looked over at her. He padded over to her with his ears slightly tilted back. Was he in trouble? "I have no scratches." He pointed out.

"I know. I just need to speak with you." Her mew was now more urgent.

Shadowpaw could feel his heart racing. "I didn't make the battle happen." He quickly protested.

"I don't blame you." She meowed, softly. "I just wanted to acknowledge the fact that you haven't been speaking to Shadepelt. I noticed that you didn't sneak out last night."

Shadowpaw relaxed his bristled neck fur and sat down, wrapping

his tail over his front paws. "My Clan is more important." He purred, confidently.

"Good." Waterlily replied swiftly. "Do you think that the battle was your fault?" She meowed slowly, trying to carefully read his thoughts, but not make it noticeable.

Shadowpaw winced and tilted his head in confusion. *Can she read my mind?* He thought, bitterly. Then he shook his head, hoping that she actually couldn't. "No. RiverClan has always wanted Sunningrocks. I believe it was just by chance that I was speaking with Shadepelt."

Waterlily dipped her head, respectively to his response. "Well put." She paused for a few moments, looking out into the distance past Shadowpaw. "You may go. Thank you."

Shadowpaw padded away in silence to the apprentice den. His paws ached with pain, yet he was excited that he had experienced a battle. Though he hated battles, it was a rather different experience. He laid down in his nest and closed his eyes to sleep off his thoughts that haunted him. *Did Shadepelt really make the battle happen? If so, how?*

Chapter Seventeen

Whitestorm approached Waterlily with a pained expression on his face, his side dripping with blood. She quickly beckoned him to her side. Fireheart was not too far behind him, along with Darkstripe and Dustpelt.

"I'm guessing all went well?" Mewed Waterlily as she attended to Whitestorm's gash first. She applied a poultice then pressed onto his side the cobwebs she had laying next to her.

"We won for now if that's what you mean." Replied Fireheart, licking his deep wound.

Waterlily looked up in dismay, but said nothing. Whitestorm flinched, then relaxed once the cobwebs stopped the bleeding and acted as a band-aid. He dipped his head to Fireheart as he passed by, then padded out of the den.

Fireheart limped over, his flank marked with a deep gash. Waterlily motioned for him to sit down. He obeyed and let her tend to his wounds. As she used her paw to spread some cobweb, he began talking of whatever was on his mind in a hushed voice. "It was a fierce battle out there. RiverClan fought with all their strength, but we stood our ground."

"Good." She mumbled with an herb in her mouth. She applied a poultice then swiftly nodded letting him know that he was free to go. She didn't really want to talk. She felt exhausted from preparing the herbs for the battle and she wanted to make sure that Shadowpaw didn't go sneaking out again, but Fireheart continued.

"I fear Tigerstar may be planning more than what we saw."

Waterlily widened her eyes. Not what she was expecting, nor was it something she wanted to hear either. Did Shadowpaw share more than she thought?

Fireheart could sense her expression change and her worry began to rise. "I will leave you be." He mewed, then quickly padded out of the medicine den.

Waterlily found herself alone in the quiet confines of the medicine den. The flickering glow of the remaining herbs cast gentle shadows on the walls, creating an atmosphere of solitude and contemplation. The sounds of the camp outside filtered in, a symphony of murmurs and pawsteps. With the wounded cats tended to and their injuries on the mend, she took a moment to gather her thoughts. Her gaze drifted to the starry night sky visible through the den's entrance, and she wondered about the challenges that lay ahead for ThunderClan.

Waterlily reflected on the conversations she had with Bluestar, and Fireheart. The looming threat of Tigerstar and his alliance weighed heavily on her mind. She knew Bluestar thought she was making the right choice, but she couldn't help, but feel that WindClan would be good to partner with. They had the numbers and the strength to help beat Tigerstar.

Taking a deep breath, Waterlily grounded herself in the present moment. She surveyed the medicine den, ensuring everything was organized and prepared for any future emergencies. Her herbs were neatly arranged, ready to be used at a moment's notice. The comforting scent of the den mixed with the healing aroma of the herbs, creating an environment of solace and strength. She looked up at silverpelt wondering what to do. Then she thought of perhaps speaking with StarClan again. But if she did, they might not be much help. All they seem to be giving her is just more prophecies and more questions going through her mind.

Waterlily's thoughts were interrupted by the sudden appearance of a black shadow in the night. Startled, she jolted upright, her eyes wide with surprise and concern. She quickly composed herself, her expression shifting to one of dismay as she met a familiar green gaze.

"Shadowpaw," Waterlily mewed, her voice carrying a mix of worry and disappointment. "You startled me. What are you doing here? Is something the matter?"

Shadowpaw shifted uncomfortably under Waterlily's amber gaze, his eyes avoiding direct contact. His voice came out in a hesitant mew. "I... I couldn't sleep is all."

Waterlily softly sighed, knowing what troubled him. "You still think that this is your fault?"

Shadowpaw could then feel his heart beginning to race. *How does she always know what I am about to say?* He nodded his head, not able to keep his gaze.

"It is not." Her voice was cool and steady. "I know that I had blamed you, but you didn't know."

Shadowpaw could feel his heart trying to thump out of his chest. He couldn't tell if was because he was glad she was now on his side, or angry because she thinks of him as weak for thinking he blames himself.

Waterlily tilted her head to the side, knowing exactly what he was thinking. She blinked blankly for a moment, then softly shook her head. "It will be hard to ensure yourself, but just know that I believe in you. You will be a great warrior someday."

Shadowpaw dipped his head in acceptance, then padded off towards the apprentices' den. Waterlily watched as he left, almost pitying him for thinking such things. But Waterlily's thoughts shifted as she refocused her attention on the urgent matter at hand: convincing Bluestar to consider an alliance with WindClan. The weight of responsibility settled upon her shoulders, knowing that her words could potentially sway the course of ThunderClan's future.

She made her way purposefully through the camp, her mind racing with arguments and justifications for the alliance. As she approached Bluestar, she took a deep breath to steady her nerves. She knew that this conversation could be crucial in shaping the path ThunderClan should take.

"Bluestar," Waterlily called out, her voice filled with determination. "May I speak with you? I know it's late,"

Bluestar turned to face Waterlily, her expression going from sleepiness to weariness. "Waterlily, what is it?"

"We have witnessed the growing threat of Tigerstar and his alliance. RiverClan has already joined forces with him. WindClan, on the other hand, stands as a potential ally that could strengthen our position and provide support in the battles to come."

Bluestar's gaze narrowed as she listened to Waterlily's words once again about the alliance. "Alliances have their risks, Waterlily. We must tread carefully and ensure our Clan's safety above all else."

Waterlily nodded, her voice unwavering. "I understand the risks, but it is equally important to recognize the risks of standing alone. We have seen the strength of numbers in previous battles. With WindClan as our ally, we can present a united front against Tigerstar and his forces."

Bluestar's eyes softened as she absorbed Waterlily's reasoning. The weight of leadership showed in her weary gaze, but also a glimmer of willingness to consider the possibility. "You make a valid point, Waterlily. Our Clan's survival is paramount, and if an alliance with WindClan can offer us greater protection, then we must seriously consider it."

Waterlily winded her eyes, not thinking what would happen after she finally got Bluestar to consider her thoughts. She dipped her head, then padded out of the den in silence. A purr began to rumble in her throat as she padded down the slope. Maybe this will help them defeat Tigerstar once and for all!

Chapter Eighteen

Shadowpaw eagerly padded alongside Sandstorm as they made their way to the training hollow. He could sense the determination in his mentor's eyes, a sign that today's training session would focus on combat and honing his battle skills. His heart raced with anticipation as he prepared himself for the challenges that lay ahead.

Sandstorm's gaze shifted to her young apprentice, a hint of excitement glinting in her eyes. "Today, Shadowpaw, we're going to focus on fighting techniques. I have some new moves I'd like to show you, ones that will help you become more agile and effective in battle."

Shadowpaw's ears perked up, his curiosity piqued. "I'm ready, Sandstorm. Show me what you've got."

"Watch closely, Shadowpaw," Sandstorm called out, her voice filled with a blend of confidence and determination. "The first move I want to show you is a quick and powerful move, designed to catch your opponent off guard."

With lightning speed, She lunged forward, her claws extended, and delivered a series of rapid blows to an imaginary enemy. Each strike was precise, aimed at vital spots, and executed with a fluid motion that seemed almost effortless.

Shadowpaw's eyes widened in awe as he absorbed every detail of the technique. He could see the effectiveness of it, envisioning how it could catch an opponent by surprise and leave them vulnerable. He attempted it and Sandstorm nodded approvingly.

"Now, the next move is all about evading your opponent's attacks and staying one step ahead. Watch closely." She ducked, twisted, and weaved, avoiding imaginary blows with impeccable timing and agility.

Shadowpaw mimicked her in the same grace as she did. Though he had hoped to train with an actual opponent. Sandstorm must have noticed his impatience and flicked her tail towards Darkstripe and his apprentice, Fernpaw.

"Could we train together?" Asked Sandstorm padding up to them.

Darkstripe nodded swiftly. "Fernpaw could use some practice in combat." He glanced over at Fernpaw and narrowed his eyes.

"Very well." Sandstorm took a few paces backwards and dipped her head at Shadowpaw to go whenever they were both ready.

The two apprentices faced each other, their paws poised and muscles tensed, ready to engage in mock combat. Shadowpaw remembered the techniques Sandstorm had taught him - the swift movements, agile dodges, and precise strikes. He was eager to put his newfound skills to the test.

With a sudden surge of energy, Shadowpaw lunged forward, his claws sheathed, aiming to land a blow on Fernpaw. Fernpaw reacted swiftly, evading his attack and countering with a well-timed move of her own. She ducked down, rolled over and slithered like a snake, avoiding Shadowpaw's blows. Shadowpaw felt defeated, even though they weren't actually hurting one another.

Fernpaw then leaped onto Shadowpaw and pinned him down in one graceful move. Shadowpaw went limp, but Fernpaw knew that trick all too well.

"Try dodging the strikes, Shadowpaw." Called out Sandstorm.

Shadowpaw got up and nodded his head in thanks. He knew he could do it, he just felt distracted again today.

After a long day of training, Shadowpaw finally was able to avoid the leaps and blows from Fernpaw and he was also able to land a few blows back at her.

"Well done you two!" Praised Darkstripe.

"Yes, good training today." Agreed Sandstorm.

As the sun began to set, casting a warm glow over the training area, Shadowpaw and Fernpaw shared a sense of accomplishment. They both followed their mentors back into camp and headed to the apprentices' den to sleep. He was exhausted and was glad to be finally getting more rest. He closed his eyes and soon began to dream.

He found himself back in ThunderClan's territory, the familiar sights and scents surrounding him. The sun bathed the forest in a golden glow, casting dappled shadows upon the ground. Shadowpaw's whiskers twitched as he took in the serenity of his surroundings.

He padded through the undergrowth, his paws barely making a sound. The forest seemed alive with activity, birds singing and prey scurrying about. The air was crisp and filled with the scent of pine and earth. *Was this real?* He blinked his eyes a few times thinking maybe he was dreaming of StarClan, but he was in ThunderClan's hunting grounds.

As Shadowpaw roamed the familiar territory, he noticed the rustling of leaves nearby. Curiosity piqued, he followed the sound until he reached a small clearing. To his surprise, he found himself face to face with a playful butterfly, its colorful wings fluttering in the sunlight.

Intrigued, Shadowpaw couldn't resist the urge to play along. He pounced and leaped, his agile movements mirroring the butterfly's delicate dance. The world around him seemed to fade into the background as he immersed himself in the simple joy of the moment.

Then he was awoken by a jab in his belly. "Hey, you're fidgeting in your sleep."

Shadowpaw opened his eyes slowly. "Sorry." He whispered, almost too worn out to continue speaking and explaining what he was dreaming about. He wanted to go back to his dream of chasing a butterfly. So he closed his eyes again and let his world of dreams open up once more.

Darkness shrouded the landscape, a chilling wind whispering through unseen branches. The familiar scents of ThunderClan were replaced by an unsettling mixture of fear and uncertainty.

He found himself standing in the heart of the forest, but it was no longer the welcoming territory he knew. Shadows danced ominously around him, twisting and contorting like malevolent spirits. A sense of foreboding settled deep within him, as if an invisible weight pressed upon his shoulders.

The air grew heavy with an unspoken danger, and a voice echoed from the darkness. It was a voice dripping with malice, a voice that sent shivers down his spine.

"Shadowpaw," it hissed, seeping into his consciousness like a venomous serpent. "You are destined for darkness."

Shadowpaw's fur bristled, his heartbeat quickening with apprehension. He tried to call out, to make sense of the haunting words, but his voice was caught in his throat. The shadows closed in around him, suffocating his senses, and he felt a clawed grip tightening around his heart. Was it Tigerstar trying to make him take the wrong path?

Chapter Nineteen

Waterlily scrambled to her paws and pricked her ears as Cinderpelt came running into her den. She breathed heavily and almost collapsed from exhaustion. Waterlily widened her eyes and quickly glanced at her twisted leg. She seemed fine, but perhaps she wasn't.

"What happened?" She finally meowed once she saw that Cinderpelt was able to breathe normally.

"I can't find Bluestar anywhere."

Waterlily softly sighed and glanced above Cinderpelt, looking out into camp. The camp was empty and almost no sound was heard, except the pitter patters from warriors looking around for Bluestar. "Where did you last see her?" She finally mewed, looking back down at Cinderpelt.

"In her den. I remember she was given some poppy seeds earlier from you, but she didn't eat them. Her den was empty."

"How long ago was she gone?"

"Quite a while. The scent was stale."

Waterlily looked down at her paws and tried to think where Bluestar might have gone by herself. She couldn't have gone too far. She was still sore from the last battle she was in.

"Bluestar's not a kit, you know." The interruption came from Whitestorm, padding inside the medicine den. "She might have gone on patrol. For all you know, other cats are with her." He spoke calmly as he bared his teeth in a yawn.

"She was not in any state of mind to go on a patrol. Even you know that, Whitestorm." Mewed Waterlily shaking her head slowly.

Whitestorm dipped his head, knowing she was right. Bluestar is usually in her den all day. Everyone noticed that. Whitestorm then

began padding the other way to the warriors' den. "I know you will find her, Waterlily. You are our medicine cat, after all."

Waterlily tipped her head to the side in confusion. What does her being a medicine cat have to do with Bluestar? Almost as Waterlily had thought, Cinderpelt was thinking the same, except she said it aloud. "What does being a medicine cat have to do with that?" She mewed.

Waterlily flinched as she wondered how Cinderpelt knew exactly what she was thinking. "I do not know. Unless he thinks I know her best. But that would be Fireheart..."

"And Fireheart has gone missing as well." Added in Cinderpelt.

"That doesn't help." Waterlily murmured half to herself.

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By the time the sun set, Bluestar and Fireheart were still missing. Waterlily sat just below the ravine, waiting to see if Bluestar or Fireheart showed up. Just as she thought the absolute worst of them, she heard soft whispers coming from above the ravine. A blue-gray she-cat appeared from above the ravine and she looked down before coming down. Then a ginger tom following her. Waterlily knew instantly that it was Bluestar and Fireheart. "What happened to you both?"

"I went to Highstones." Replied Bluestar.

"I thought you didn't believe in StarClan?" Scoffed Waterlily.

Bluestar shot her a stern glance and narrowed her eyes. "I came to challenge them." She hissed. "I wanted to know why they did this to me."

"And? Did you get answers?" Mewed Waterlily, trying to sound like she didn't already know the answer.

Bluestar looked down at her paws. "No." She closed her eyes clouded for a few moments, then she looked back up at Waterlily. "But they did tell me something else." Waterlily leaned in a little

closer, letting Bluestar continue when she was ready. "StarClan did tell me that there is evil loose in the forest. They spoke of a 'pack.' They told me that it will bring more death and destruction than the forest has ever seen before."

Waterlily widened her eyes. "Pack of what?"

Bluestar shook her head slowly. "I do not know."

Fireheart took a pace forward and widened his eyes. "Perhaps they mean dog?" He whispered.

Waterlily could feel her heart beginning to race. She didn't know much about dogs, but what she did know, they were vicious animals.

Bluestar then chipped in. "A dog couldn't do that much damage."

Fireheart shuffled his paws, not knowing what to think. If they were attacked by dogs, they would have no choice but to give up. Fireheart knew that dogs were not something they could easily beat.

Waterlily could feel his anxiety starting to explode in his chest. "We must do something, Bluestar." She chimed in.

Then Fireheart looked at Waterlily and nodded his head. "I agree. We could set a watch on the borders, and we should increase the patrols." He paused for a moment, trying to think hard on more to do. "We need to make sure there's always a guard on the camp when..." His voice trailed off as he shifted his gaze over at Bluestar who was longer listening.

"Bluestar?" He mewed, tilting his head to the side. She crouched motionless, her eyes fixed on her paws. "Bluestar?" He mewed again.

The ThunderClan leader looked up at him, her eyes bottomless pools of despair. "What is the point?" She rasped. "StarClan have decreed that death will come. A dark force walks this forest, and even StarClan themselves cannot control it. Or *will* not. There is nothing we can do."

Waterlily tensed. She really didn't believe in StarClan when they tried to warn her of their troubles. She softly sighed then dipped her head to her leader. "Very well, Bluestar." Then she looked over at Fireheart who was even more concerned for Bluestar. She waited till Bluestar was too far from ear shot. "I will go to Highstones in a few moments and seek guidance. For the time being, do as what you said."

Fireheart dipped his head in agreement then padded over to the warriors den to begin thinking of potential patrols. Waterlily padded back to the medicine den and prepped traveling herbs for herself. Then she began thinking... *What if they attack while I'm at Highstones? If they did, we wouldn't have a medicine cat to help them.* She shook her head to clear it. She had to look for someone to try and help her. Someone who perhaps knew the herbs well enough. Though she couldn't think of anyone, she had to get to Highstones before it got too late.

Quickly she tried to think of someone who was a fast learner. Fireheart would be good, but he was already deputy. Carrying another important duty would only make him too exhausted. Then she thought of Cinderpelt. She had once helped her with Littlecloud and Whitethroat. She padded over to the warriors' den and peeked inside. Cinderpelt was laying in a small ball at the end of the den. "Cinderpelt!" She called out softly, trying not to wake any other warriors.

Cinderpelt lifted her head and blinked tiredly up at Waterlily. She then scrambled to her paws and zig-zagged around the other warriors that were scattered around inside the den. She yawned then sat down just outside the warriors' den. "What's up?" She mewed right after her yawn.

"I want to ask if you're able to take over for me while I go to Highstones?"

Chapter Twenty

Cinderpelt widened her eyes. "T-take over for you?" She stuttered, clearly surprised that Waterlily would even ask her for such a special duty.

"I can teach you the basics." Waterlily offered.

Cinderpelt hesitated for a moment, then nodded her head. "Very well."

Waterlily's gratitude swelled within her as she explained the herbs and remedies that Cinderpelt would need to perform during her temporary role as a medicine cat. With each word, Cinderpelt's confidence grew, and Waterlily knew that she had made the right choice. ThunderClan would be in capable paws, and she could embark on her journey to the Moonstone with a sense of reassurance.

Leaving detailed instructions and guidance for Cinderpelt, Waterlily bestowed her apprentice-turned-caretaker with a reassuring touch. "Trust in yourself, Cinderpelt. You possess the skills and the heart to carry out your duties with compassion and wisdom. I have faith in you." She finished with a purr.

With a nod of understanding, Cinderpelt absorbed the information, ready to embrace her newfound responsibilities. Waterlily's heart swelled with pride for her temporary apprentice, knowing that ThunderClan would be well cared for in her absence.

Waterlily's steps were determined as she ventured towards the Moonstone, her thoughts consumed by a mix of concern for Bluestar and the anticipation of connecting with their warrior ancestors. She padded inside the Moonstone. She could feel a cold shiver run down her spine. She didn't know if it was a sign or if the air was beginning to get cold once more.

As she reached the inside, Waterlily took a deep breath, preparing

herself for the connection she sought. She lowered her head, her paws resting on the cool surface of the stone, and closed her eyes. In the stillness, she called upon StarClan and the world opened up around her.

"Waterlily." Mewed a soft voice.

Waterlily didn't even have to turn her head to know who the voice belonged to. "Spottedleaf. It is great to hear your voice." She purred, then turned to face her and rubbed her muzzle against her cheek.

"I know why you have come." Spottedleaf lowered her head in shame. "I cannot help you in what you seek. Bluestar is a wise leader, but she is facing troubles like no other leader." She gazed back up at Waterlily, knowing how she would feel.

Waterlily couldn't meet Spottedleaf's amber gaze and shuffled her paws. "There's nothing for Bluestar?" She finally mewed, closing her eyes tightly in hopes to get a different answer.

"We cannot make anyone believe in us. If that's what she chooses, we have other ways to get through to the Clan."

Waterlily sighed in acceptance. "Then what about the pack? What all do you know?"

"That is all we know, now. I cannot tell you more than you already know."

Waterlily began feeling frustrated with Spottedleaf's responses. "What do you mean? I only know what Bluestar has told me!" She hissed.

Spottedleaf flinched from Waterlily's sudden anger. "There is evil loose in the forest." She echoed as if whispers were sending her these words.

"Do you mean Tigerstar?" Waterlily's eyes widened in dismay.

Spottedleaf just shook her head and shrugged her shoulders. "I do not know. That is all I can tell you."

Still frustrated, Waterlily looked away, not able to keep Spottedleaf's soft amber gaze. "I just don't know what to do." She finally meowed hoarsely.

Spottedleaf dipped her head. "I am sorry, Waterlily. I wish that I was more help."

Waterlily still couldn't meet her eyes. She felt like she made this trip for nothing.

Spottedleaf lowered her gaze then padded away into the distance. Spottedleaf's form began to fade slightly, but her words remained soothing. "Trust in the path you walk. Bluestar will find her way back when the time is right. StarClan watches over her, even when the path ahead seems uncertain."

As Spottedleaf's presence gradually dissipated, Waterlily felt more at ease, but she still knew going back without any helpful information would only break her Clan even more.

Waterlily then awoke and made her way back to ThunderClan. Waterlily embarked on her journey back, following the familiar trail that led her across the thunderpath and through the border of WindClan's territory. The moon hung low in the sky, casting a silvery glow upon the landscape. The night was calm, but her heart was still heavy with concern for Bluestar and the challenges that lay ahead.

As she padded through the blades of grass, Waterlily found comfort in the rhythmic sound of her paws. The grass seemed to embrace her with its soothing presence, as if reassuring her that she was not alone in her worries. As the night wore on, her steps quickened with the anticipation of returning to ThunderClan. The camp awaited her with its familiar scents and sounds as she padded through the gorse tunnel and down the ravine.

She then padded back into the medicine den and saw Cinderpelt fast asleep just beside the small pool of water. The herbs were neatly tucked away in the right places and the den was tidy and clean. With a soft sigh of relief, she nestled into the pile of fresh moss. Cinderpelt must have collected some. She laid her head down

on her paws and closed her eyes to sleep.

Though she found StarClan to be useless with her questions, she knew that Spottedleaf was right. Bluestar has faced many hardships throughout her leadership and she couldn't imagine going through the same things as she did. But now what bothered her the most was that Tigerstar has plans to take over all four Clans. If Bluestar continues to stand alone, ThunderClan may be no more.

Chapter Twenty One

Shadowpaw's heart quickened as he glanced around the dimly lit apprentice's den. The moonlight filtered through the branches, casting eerie shadows that seemed to dance around him. He shook his head, trying to dismiss the feeling of being watched as mere paranoia from his dream.

But as he settled himself, the sensation persisted, and he couldn't shake off the eerie feeling. He lifted his head once more. He couldn't see anything out of the ordinary, but his instincts told him that something was out there, watching him. The silence around him seemed to amplify, and every rustle of leaves and distant hoot of an owl only heightened his unease.

He heard swift movements behind him and he jumped, not knowing what it could be. Then he saw that it was only Brightpaw who had fidgeted in her sleep. He took a deep breath and laid his head back down, trying to ignore all the other noises that kept him awake. He slowly went back to sleep in hopes of dreaming something normal.

Instead, the shadows came back to him. He found himself deep in the forest, his heart pounding. He looked around, alert as he could be, but could sense nothing. His heart raced faster. His ears twitching with anticipation, not knowing what would happen. He remembered the shadows that taunted him and suffocated him.

"Anyone out there?" He called out, finally able to speak this time.

He pricked his ears, but there was no answer. He was left with only silence. He padded a few steps forward and felt his paws lightly tracing across crunchy leaves below him. With every crunch, he wanted to stop and listen for any signs of movement, but he dared not to. He didn't want to know what lurked in the shadows, especially if it was Tigerstar.

In the distance, he saw flickers of movement, like fleeting glimpses of shapes darting between the trees. The shadows seemed to play

tricks on his eyes, making him question if he was truly alone in the dream.

Then, as if emerging from the depths of the darkness, a lone figure materialized before him. Its form was obscured, shrouded in shadows, but its eyes glinted with an otherworldly light.

"Who are you?" Shadowpaw called out, his voice echoing through the dream.

The figure then spoke, its voice soft and haunting, "There are shadows in every cat's heart, young one. Embrace them, and you shall find your path." It was from a tom, Shadowpaw suspected.

Shadowpaw shook his head as if to clear it. *Shadows in every cat's heart?* He echoed in his mind. He tilted his head to the side and tried to make out the glimpse of shadow that now stood just a tail-length in front of him.

A pair of burning amber eyes stared down at him and Shadowpaw shuddered from the tom's amber gaze. He knew at once who it was. Tigerstar was somehow in his dreams. He didn't know if this was truly happening or if it was all just in his head.

Tigerstar's gaze was intense, almost hypnotic. He seemed to peer directly into Shadowpaw's soul, as if he could see all of his fears and doubts laid bare, before him. Shadowpaw tried to shake off the feeling of unease, reminding himself that this was just a dream.

In the midst of these conflicting emotions, a part of Shadowpaw wondered if this encounter was a sign, a warning of some impending danger or a test of his loyalty to ThunderClan. But another part of him couldn't help but wonder if it was all just his mind playing tricks on him. He had told secrets to Shadepelt before and she had betrayed him. He felt foolish for doing so, but he vowed to not to do it again. Was this punishment for all what he had done?

He opened his eyes and glanced around the apprentices' den. Fernpaw and Brightpaw were still sound asleep, but the rest of the apprentices have gone. Their nests were empty and smelled like

they were gone since dawn. It was just hitting sunhigh and he scrambled tiredly to his feet.

Sandstorm popped her head inside the den. "Oh good, you're up!" She purred. "I let you sleep in today. We're going out on evening patrol and wanted to make sure you had energy for that." Shadowpaw just nodded his head in acceptance and followed her out of the den. Sandstorm noticed his tiredness , even though he slept in for quite some time. "Did you sleep well?" She asked, cooly, trying not to sound too prodding.

"I guess so." Came the unsatisfying answer.

Sandstorm sat down and softly nudged him. "Come on, you can tell me." She finally urged.

Shadowpaw sat down beside her and hung his head low. "Just had a strange dream is all."

Sandstorm was puzzled on why he didn't want to tell her what was troubling him, but brushed past it and looked out into the distance as she spoke. "Very well. Let's get going on some hunting, then we can come back here until our evening patrol."

Shadowpaw reluctantly followed her out of camp and up the ravine. His mind was still preoccupied with the unsettling dream he had experienced. He wanted to share it with Sandstorm, but a part of him hesitated. He fearing that she might not understand or that it would burden her with unnecessary worries.

The two set off together, and as they ventured into the woods, Shadowpaw took the lead. He had finally felt more at ease from the dream once they reached the great sycamore tree . He has grown more familiar with the territory and knew the best spots to find prey. Sandstorm observed him with a proud smile, recognizing the progress he had made.

As they padded along, Shadowpaw spotted a flash of movement among the leaves. He motioned for Sandstorm to crouch beside him as they spotted a small group of mice grazing nearby. With a quick nod from Sandstorm, they silently spread out, preparing to strike.

The mice were scurrying around, unaware of the presence of the skilled hunters nearby. Shadowpaw took a deep breath, steadying himself for the perfect moment. He waited, still crouched down, for Sandstorm to give the signal to begin.

Sandstorm flicked the tip of her tail and swiftly nodded. She quickly glanced back at the mice to see if any of them had seen her swift movements. Luckily they were still busy nibbling on some berries that had fallen from a bush.

Shadowpaw launched himself forward, his paws barely making a sound on the forest floor. The mouse seemed to sense danger at the last moment and attempted to flee, but Shadowpaw was too quick. He pounced with precision, catching the mouse in his jaws. Sandstorm raced after he did and caught one herself. They both purred with pride as they padded to a place to bury them. They quickly buried their catches and scanned the forest floors for more prey.

Sandstorm pricked her ears and heard a soft rustling sound. Shadowpaw heard the same thing and twitched his ear, trying to find out where the direction of the rustling had come from.

He heard it again and found that it was just a fox-lengths away. He glanced at Sandstorm and they both nodded their heads. They went in different directions that circled back, towards the small vole that was lurking in a cluster of ferns. He concentrated on his breathing, trying to control the excitement that threatened to give away his presence. He watched the vole's movements, trying to predict its next step.

Suddenly, the vole paused, its whiskers twitching. Shadowpaw knew this was his chance. With a swift and silent leap, he closed the distance between them. His claws found purchase in the soft forest floor, and he grabbed the vole in his jaws before it had a chance to react. Sandstorm praised him with a purr. "Great job!" She exclaimed.

Shadowpaw carried the small vole to the place where he and Sandstorm buried some mice. Sandstorm padded after him. She then carried the two mice while Shadowpaw carried the vole. They

headed back to camp, with their catch in their jaws, proudly.

He spotted Fireheart and Cloudpaw nearby, sharing a playful wrestling match. Fireheart's warm green eyes met Shadowpaw's, and the young apprentice couldn't help but feel a surge of pride wash over him as he reached the fresh-kill pile. The scent of the vole and mouse mingled with the other prey, creating a mouth-watering aroma. He was definitely hungry.

"Great job out there, Shadowpaw," Sandstorm praised, a smile tugging at her whiskers. "You're becoming quite the skilled hunter!"

Shadowpaw purred with pride. 'When do we go on evening patrol?" He was excited to see what the evening patrols were about.

"Soon. Go ahead and eat something." She mewed, picking out a small wren for herself.

Shadowpaw nodded, then studied the fresh-kill pile. There was lots to choose from. One finally caught his attention. He pulled out a squirrel. Then he glanced over at the medicine den. Waterlily probably hasn't eaten yet and he decided to take her the vole that he caught. He awkwardly carried the squirrel and vole over to Waterlily.

Waterlily was counting her supply as usual when he finally reached the medicine den. "I got a vole for you." He purred, dropping both prey he had hanging from his mouth.

Waterlily looked up from her counting blankly, and shook her head as if to clear it. "Thank you. You can leave it and I'll get to it." She mewed swiftly, then went back to counting.

Shadowpaw laid his ears flat on his head in frustration. "I wanted to eat with you, if I could?" He prodded.

Waterlily looked back up at him and relaxed her shoulders. "Oh, of course." She was shocked that he wanted to do that again. He hasn't wanted to eat with her since he became an apprentice. Shadowpaw padded inside the den and crouched beside her. He began eating his squirrel slowly. He wanted to cherish this moment, knowing that he

doesn't sit with her often enough.

Chapter Twenty Two

Shadowpaw awoke to Sandstorm poking him with her muzzle. He looked up at her with confusion then quickly scrambled to his paws once he saw urgency in her expression. "What's up?"

"Follow me. We're going to a meeting." She quickly mewed then padded out into the clearing. Shadowpaw followed her and scanned the clearing. It was still dark outside and the moon was high in the sky. Cloudpaw and Swiftpaw sat at the edge, along with Whitestorm, Fireheart, Dustpelt, and Brackenfur.

Bluestar flicked her tail, and she led them up the ravine and through the gorse tunnel. Fireheart padded just a tail-length behind her while the others were scattered behind him. Bluestar paused at the top of the slope. As the other warriors caught up with her, starlight cast a faint sheen on their fur, touching their pricked ears and reflecting from their wide eyes.

Shadowpaw looked across the border into WindClan territory, he thought at first that the sweep of moorland was empty, stretching up to the night sky. Wind swept across it and rustled the oak trees in the hollow behind him. Then he caught sight of movement up ahead, and he realized that a line of cats was standing there, with Tallstar at their center.

"What's that?" Bluestar hissed, turning to glare into his eyes. "So many WindClan cats? I thought I was coming here to talk." Her eyes glared furiously at Fireheart, some sharpened instinct flooding her expression with understanding. "This looks more like an ambush than a meeting of leaders."

Fireheart laid back his ears. "It's not." He tried to reassure her.

At a flick of her tail, the ThunderClan warriors moved up in purposeful silence to form a tight line on either side of their leader, facing the WindClan cats. Shadowpaw followed suit and quickly lined beside Sandstorm, with his chest puffed out.

If just one cat moved forward, battle could engulf them all. He saw Dustpelt exchange a tense glance with Brindleface, as if both cats were thinking the same as he was. Next to him, Sandstorm kept her gaze fixed on the WindClan cats, her ears flat to her head. Swiftpaw stared nervously at his leader, but he held his place in the line.

A few fox-lengths away, Tallstar stood a pace or two ahead of his own warriors. As the first pale light of dawn crept into the sky. Shadowpaw could now see the skinny WindClan leader. His black-and-white fur was fluffed up, making him seem less small and his tail held erect. Behind him was Onewhisker, Morningflower, and the young apprentice Gorsepaw.

Looking directly at Bluestar, Tallstar dipped his head. "No battle will be fought here today. I said that I would come here to talk, and that's what I intend to do."

Bluestar did not respond. She crouched on the ground, her fur bristling and her teeth bared in a snarl of defiance. Shadowpaw tensed, thinking maybe there wasn't going to be a meeting after all.

"We have lost prey too." Tallstar continued. "It may be dogs, or rogues. It is not cats from WindClan."

"So you say." Meowed Bluestar. She sounded uncertain now.

Shadowpaw looked over at Fireheart and saw him tense his haunches. "Bluestar," Fireheart mewed urgently, "a noble leader doesn't take her warriors into battle without need. If there's the least doubt that—"

"Do you think you know more than I do about how to lead a Clan?" Bluestar interrupted. Her fur had bristled again, but this time it was Fireheart who was the target of her anger. Shadowpaw widened his eyes. *Was she turning on her own Clan?*

"Young cats think they know everything," Tallstar meowed. There was a hint of sympathetic humor in his voice. He paused for a few short moments then continued. "But sometimes we have to listen to them. There is no need for this battle."

Bluestar kept her eyes narrowed, and twitched her ears irritably. "Very well." She mewed reluctantly. "I accept your word—for now. But if my patrols scent WindClan one tail-length over our border..." She whipped around and called to the ThunderClan cats. "Back to camp!" She ordered, leaping ahead of them.

Shadowpaw sighed with relief. He did not want to go into battle so early. The sun was just beginning to creep up through the trees and Shadowpaw still felt exhausted. He padded back into camp and watched as Bluestar trekked back up into her den. She then looked back and glared at Fireheart. "You." She hissed. "Come with me. I must speak with you."

Shadowpaw's eyes watched as Fireheart obeyed her. Her voice was harsh and she sounded mad. He wanted to know why she brought him up there, but he wasn't allowed unless called to go up.

***

About half a moon after the confrontation with WindClan, Bluestar came padding from her den. "I'll lead the patrol this morning." She meowed, and went to wait by the entrance to the camp.

Shadowpaw exchanged confused glances with Fireheart. Fireheart was just as confused as he was. Sandstorm padded to his side. "I guess she's feeling better." She whispered in Fireheart's ear.

Bluestar led a small patrol with Whitestorm, Fireheart and Cloudpaw following. Sandstorm flicked her tail and bounded off after them. Shadowpaw followed closely behind. Bluestar guided the patrol along the WindClan border, marking it with her scent as a clear message to any intruders.

"WindClan is staying within their borders." Mewed Bluestar, softly and opening her jaws to taste the air.

Shadowpaw pricked his ears and lifted his muzzle. He couldn't pick up any scents of WindClan crossing their border markers. Then Shadowpaw remembered how hostile she was in the meeting they had with Tallstar. *Would Bluestar really attack WindClan at a time like this?*

Chapter Twenty Three

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey join beneath the Highrock for a Clan meeting!" Called Bluestar from the highrock. Waterlily tiredly opened her eyes; she yawned then slowly got to her paws and padded to the edge of the clearing. She could feel sudden tension as her eyes locked to the front where Fireheart and Cloudpaw sat. Was Fireheart worried about Cloudpaw again? She dove deeper into his thoughts as he sat in silence, staring out into the distance. Something had gone down with Longtail and Darkstripe. He dared not to enter in deeper, or she might find out something that she had no business in.

"I, Bluestar, leader of ThunderClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. He has trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend him to you as a warrior in his turn." Her voice was harsh, as if she still didn't believe in StarClan and their rituals, though she did it because she knew it was time for someone to become a warrior.

"Cloudpaw," Bluestar continued, "do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend this Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do." Cloudpaw meowed fervently.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name." Bluestar went on, each word dragged out of her like thorns. "Cloudpaw, from this moment you will be known as Cloudtail. StarClan honors your courage and your independence, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan."

Waterlily could hear her voice crack when she mentioned StarClan. Leaping down the highrock, Bluestar padded to Cloudtail and rested her muzzle on his head. Cloudtail gave her shoulder a respectful lick, then went over to stand beside Fireheart.

Normally at this time, the Clan would yowl his new name in

acceptance, but there was only silence. It felt like everyone could feel Bluestar's disbelief in StarClan when she recited those words. Cloudtail was beginning to look a little crestfallen when Brindleface, who had suckled him as a tiny kit, padded up and pressed her tabby muzzle against his. "Well done, Cloudtail!" she exclaimed. "I'm so proud of you!"

As if she had given a signal, Cinderpelt came up, and then at last the other cats began to crowd around, greeting Cloudtail by his new name and congratulating him. Waterlily glanced over at Fireheart and sensed his relief once warriors began coming up to the new warrior and congratulating him.

"You're keeping vigil tonight." Fireheart reminded his former apprentice, trying to sound as if this were like any other warrior naming ceremony.

Cloudtail nodded and padded off to take up a position in the center of the clearing. His head and tail were raised proudly, but Fireheart knew that the ceremony had been shadowed by the jealousy of the other apprentices, and by Bluestar's transparent loss of faith.

Waterlily padded over to Cloudtail and dipped her head. "Well deserved." She purred softly. "You will make a fine warrior." She added, then padded back to her den with her tail held high, without seeing Cloudtail's respectful nod.

Later, as Waterlily tended to her herbs near the medicine den, she saw Fireheart approaching. She nodded in greeting, her expression serious. "I saw what you saw," Fireheart murmured as he sat down beside her.

"Do you think she meant it?" Waterlily met Fireheart's disheartening gaze.

"What she said about Cloudtail?" Fireheart now looked worried that maybe he was wrong about Cloudtail being ready.

"No, about Bluestar saying stuff about StarClan in the ceremony." She flicked her tail and softly pawed at the ground. She wondered if Fireheart was really thinking the same as she was. Cloudtail was on

his mind, not Bluestar.

Waterlily could hear Fireheart sigh with relief just before he spoke. "No. She revokes them entirely." He meowed rather angrily. "She won't ever believe in them again." He added, flicking his tail irritably.

Waterlily shuffled her feet in annoyance. She knew that Fireheart wanted his leader to believe in StarClan, but he had such little hope nowadays, nothing would change his mind.

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A few sunrises had passed and Waterlily began to feel a sudden chill breeze as the air began to get a little colder as the moon rose high in the sky. The night seemed to have quickened and seemed like it last only just a few seconds. Waterlily woke up to a loud yowl calling out her name just outside her den. She scrambled to her paws in alarm.

"Waterlily!" She heard a voice call out again as she made her way out of her den.

"What happened?" Her eyes were wide in alarm, seeing that no cat was injured.

"It's Brightpaw a-and...Swiftpaw." Cloudtail meowed in panic, panting hard as he spoke.

"Show me." She quickly mewed and followed Cloudtail to the place where both apprentices were laid. Cloudtail zigzagged his way through the trees. Waterlily almost found it hard to stay close to him and was worried about losing sight of him. Then finally he stopped a few tail-lengths from Fireheart and Sandstorm. She padded to their side, slowly, noticing their heavy breathing and worry. She looked in between the two warriors and alerted her ears in horror as she spotted Swiftpaw's black-and-white body laying motionless, and just beyond him, Brightpaw.

Waterlily padded to the two lifeless bodies and pressed her ear against Swiftpaw's chest. No sounds or breathing was heard.

Swiftpaw was dead. Then she padded over to Brightpaw, expecting to feel the same thing. But to her surprise, she felt very little movement as if Brightpaw was trying to gasp for air. She checked multiple times, thinking maybe she has gone delusional, but she felt it each time.

"Cloudtail." She mewed softly. "Brightpaw is alive." Cloudtail pricked his ears and lifted his muzzle in sudden surprise. He padded slowly up to her. Waterlily could almost hear his heart pounding in fear. "It's alright." She added. "Help me get her back to camp."

Cloudtail carried Brightpaw in his jaws, letting her paws drag on the floor. All four cats arrived back at camp and all eyes turned to Cloudtail as he padded with what looked like a lifeless body. Shocked voices were heard, scattered around, as Cloudtail padded into the medicine den. He put down Brightpaw and sat down, waiting for Waterlily's next orders. Waterlily could feel all the cats wondering what had happened. She sprang up onto the highrock and flicked her tail. Once the Clan was mostly out into the clearing, she began to speak.

"Swiftpaw is dead." She exclaimed with a heavy heart. "Brightpaw will most likely make it. I do not know what did this to them." She admitted cooly, then jumped down from the highrock and padded back into the medicine den.

She nudged Brightpaw softly with her muzzle, hoping she would wake. "Brightpaw." She whispered. "What happened to you?"

A thin wailing came from Brightpaw, which gradually formed into words. Waterlily stared at her in horror as she made out what she was trying to say. "Pack, pack." She whispered. "Kill, kill."

Chapter Twenty Four

The clearing buzzed with anticipation as Shadowpaw settled at the edge, his ears pricked forward to catch every word. Bluestar's commanding voice rang out, calling the Clan for attention. Shadowpaw's gaze turned to the Highrock, where Bluestar stood, her expression non-readable.

"Cats of ThunderClan," Bluestar began, her voice carrying across the clearing. "Today, we gather to witness the naming of two young kits who have reached the age to become apprentices." She paused and scanned the clearing for a few short moments."Bramblekit and Tawnykit, please step forward."

Shadowpaw watched as the two young kits with excitement in their eyes, bounded forward. Bramblekit's tabby fur shimmered in the sunlight, while Tawnykit's mottled fur glowed like the dawn. They stood side by side, their tails twitching with eagerness. Tawnykit's green eyes brightened when she heard Bluestar say the familiar words.

"From this day forward, until they receive their warrior names, these kits shall be known as Bramblepaw and Tawnypaw." Bluestar announced, her voice strong. She glanced around the clearing and her icy blue eyes stopped on Fireheart. "Fireheart, you will mentor Bramblepaw."

Shadowpaw tilted his head to the side as he looked over at Fireheart. He looked worried about something. Then he remembered that one night that Fireheart was staring into the nursery at Bramblekit. Was he afraid of his new apprentice?

"Brackenfur, you will mentor Tawnypaw." Bluestar continued.

Shadowpaw glanced back at Fireheart and saw him looking up at Bluestar with worried eyes. More questions popped into his head, but he shook his head to clear it. He was not going to dwell on something like that. He had bigger priorities to focus on. He wanted

to become a warrior. And soon.

"And now, I think it's time we make Brightpaw a warrior." She added, looking thoughtfully at the beaten up apprentice. Her eye was scarred shut, and she widened her one good eye in dismay as she sat at the edge of the clearing.

"Brightpaw, please come forward." Bluestar beckoned her.

Brightpaw slowly padded to the front. Warriors moved out of her way as she made her way through the crowd of cats. She stopped just a few tail-lengths from the highrock and turned to face Bluestar. Bluestar studied her for a few short moments before continuing to speak. "Brightpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code, to defend and protect your Clan even at the cost of your life?"

"I-I do." She meowed, trembling. Shadowpaw could sense that she was thinking of Swiftpaw. He had died before he could become a warrior.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. From this moment on, you will be known as Lostface."

Lostface widened her eye. She didn't know why Bluestar gave her that name as if to constantly remind her of the dogs that almost killed her, but she dipped her head in acceptance and licked Bluestar's shoulder as she saw others do before her.

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The sun hung high in the sky as Sandstorm and Shadowpaw made their way to the training hollow. The scent of earth and sand filled the air. Shadowpaw's heart quickened with a mix of excitement and determination. He wanted to impress Sandstorm today with his fighting skills she had taught him in the past.

Sandstorm stopped just a few tail-lengths from the edge of the clearing and looked back at Shadowpaw from the side of her eyes. "We'll train here." She meowed gently, almost with a low growl.

Shadowpaw stared at her with wide eyes. Was she going to attack

like that? He crouched down, ready to attack at any moment in case she decided to spring backwards. She lunged forward, then sprang back in a controlled attack, and Shadowpaw almost lost balance as he was not expecting her to do a move like that. He sidestepped just in time, allowing her momentum to carry her past him, then swiped his paw in a calculated arc. Sandstorm was quick to paw back at him, but he quickly ducked. "Nice!" She praised him. "You have wonderful agility."

As the training session continued, the sun gradually descended toward the horizon. Shadows lengthened, creating an intricate dance of light and dark in the clearing. Sandstorm and Shadowpaw practiced a variety of moves, each one adding to his arsenal of skills.

With the sun dipping below the trees, Sandstorm finally called a halt to their training. Shadowpaw's breath came in ragged puffs, and his paws were covered in a fine layer of earth. Sandstorm's expression held of pride. "You're making excellent progress, Shadowpaw." She purred.

Once they returned to camp, the remaining speck of daylight was fading, painting the sky with hues of orange and pink. Shadowpaw felt a satisfying ache in his muscles, a reminder of the rigorous training he had just undergone. As they entered the camp clearing, the evening activities were in full swing. Cats were sharing tongues after a successful day of hunting and patrolling.

He, however headed towards the apprentice den, thinking of what all he learned. He was exhausted from the training and wanted nothing more than to just sleep. Nestling into his mossy nest, he closed his eyes, allowing his mind to replay the movements and techniques Sandstorm had taught him. He closed his eyes and began to dream.

Shadowpaw found himself in the heart of ThunderClan's territory. The familiar scents of pine, earth, and the distant tang of prey surrounded him. The sun was warm on his fur as he padded through the forest, feeling a sense of freedom. He lifted his muzzle and immediately smelled squirrel. He could hear his stomach rumbling and wondered if it was because he had forgotten and went

to sleep without eating anything.

Ahead of him, a plump squirrel darted between the trees. Its bushy tail twitched with nervous energy, and its sharp eyes scanned the surroundings for any sign of danger. Shadowpaw's heart raced as he slowly stalked forward, every movement calculated and precise. He felt the earth beneath his paws, the cool breeze ruffling his fur. Time seemed to slow as he focused on the squirrel, blocking out all distractions and doubts. His senses were heightened, attuned to the smallest sounds and scents of the forest.

With a sudden burst of speed, Shadowpaw launched himself forward. His muscles rippled as he chased the squirrel, the thrill of the hunt surging through his veins. The squirrel zigzagged, trying to evade its pursuer, but Shadowpaw was relentless. After a few heart-pounding moments, the squirrel made a desperate leap for a nearby tree. Shadowpaw swatted at the squirrel in hopes to bat it from going up any further, but he missed and the squirrel was gone from sight within seconds.

He sighed in disappointment, but then he spotted another squirrel eating a beech nut tree just a few fox-length in front of him. He crouched down into the hunter's position, then crept up slowly towards it. Determined to not mess up this time, he flattened his ears, not wanting to make any sounds. He almost had to hold his breath when he got closer. The squirrel still had no idea he was there. He leaped and caught the squirrel in his paws. He bit down, killing it swiftly.

Shadowpaw's eyes blinked open, a sense of disappointment washing over him. The vivid dream of the successful hunt had felt so real, and for a moment, he had truly believed he was sinking his teeth into the juicy flesh of the squirrel. But now, as reality settled in, he realized it was all just a creation of his sleeping mind. He shook his head to clear it then padded towards the fresh-kill pile. There wasn't any squirrels in the pile, but there was a plump rabbit. Everyone else has already had their fill and he was basically the last to eat since it was the middle of the night. It couldn't hurt if he ate now... could it?

He settled down a few tail-lengths away and ate the plump rabbit.

He was done in a matter of minutes.

As the last morsel of rabbit disappeared into his belly, a sense of contentment settled over him. The dream might have left him momentarily dissatisfied, but the real world had provided him with sustenance and a moment of peace. Pushing away the rabbit bones, he groomed his fur briefly, then padded back into the apprentices' den.

Bramblepaw, the new apprentice, opened his eyes and stared at Shadowpaw with a sudden blankness. "What were you doing up so early?" He yawned, glancing over at the entrance and seeing it was still rather dark outside.

"I just ate something is all. I was so tired from my battle training that I had forgotten to eat before I went to sleep." He explained, settling down into his nest again.

Bramblepaw widened his eyes. "Battle training!" He exclaimed quietly. "I can't wait for battle training. It'll be so exciting!"

Shadowpaw rested his chin on his paws and closed his eyes. "It will be." He purred in agreement. Then he remembered the worry glance that Fireheart had back in the nursery. *Is Fireheart worried that Bramblepaw will become the new Tigerstar?*

Chapter Twenty Five

A full moon crossed the sky behind thin wisps of cloud as Bluestar led her warriors to the Gathering. Waterlily trekked behind Shadowpaw as they all followed Bluestar down the slope. Tigerstar and Leopardstar were already there and sitting side by side speaking softly to one another.

Waterlily sighed in regret, knowing this was not going to be a good Gathering. She knew that RiverClan and ShadowClan had formed an alliance. Who knows what would happen now. Bluestar still refused to make an alliance with WindClan. Waterlily padded down to her usual spot with the medicine cats in the middle of the clearing. Runningnose sat awkwardly on his haunches like Yellowfang used to.

"Greetings young one." The old tom rasped, swiping his tongue over his chest.

Waterlily dipped her head in respect, but she stayed silent. Her eyes were fixed on the two leaders standing on the high branch. His ears pricked in hopes to hear what Tigerstar was saying, but she couldn't hear a thing. She could only hear Mudfur talking about a story of him curing a sickness way back then.

"And I had to go so far north, almost in the twoleg's garden to fetch the herbs. With a dog constantly barking, it was pretty difficult to concentrate." Mudfur mewed.

Waterlily looked over at Mudfur as he spoke, seeing that she couldn't hear anyone else. She may as well listen to his story. Once Mudfur finished, Tallstar stepped forward and began the Gathering with a low growl for quietness. All cats turned their gaze to him and there was sudden silence. Tallstar softly cleared his throat just before he spoke. "WindClan is doing well. There is nothing to report here." Then he stepped back to his place and sat down. He nodded his head, signaling that he was finished and for Bluestar to go next, but Tigerstar got up instead.

Tigerstar took a step forward and puffed out his chest. "We have new kits in the Clan and ShadowClan is growing strong." His meow was low and strong as it rang across the clearing. "And everyone knows that I was once apart of ThunderClan." He added, and paused for a quick moment to look around the clearing and stopped as he saw his two kits sitting surrounded by other ThunderClan apprentices. Then he continued. "While I was in ThunderClan, I had two kits. Thanks to you all, you have raised them well into being apprentices and I think it's time I take them to be with me." He looked over at Bluestar, his amber eye blazing like fire. "Bluestar, I ask that you give me Bramblepaw and Tawnypaw."

Yowls of protest from ThunderClan warriors broke out before Tigerstar had finished speaking. Waterlily sat in silence and narrowed her eyes. *How dare he even think that!* She spat to herself. She fixed her gaze on Bluestar, wondering what she would do.

Bluestar drew herself up and waited for the noise to die away before she replied. "Certainly not." She meowed. "These are ThunderClan kits. They are apprenticed now, and they will stay where they belong."

"ThunderClan?" Hissed Tigerstar. "I think not! The kits belong with me, and my warriors will take care of their apprentice training."

Bluestar shook her head. "I understand your concern, but they will be well trained here."

Tigerstar paused again, his gaze sweeping around the clearing, and when he spoke again it was not just to Bluestar but to the whole audience of cats. "The ThunderClan leader tells me how well my kits will be trained under her guidance—but ThunderClan have a poor record in looking after their young cats. One kit carried off by a hawk. One apprentice savaged to death and another permanently crippled when they were sent out alone without a warrior. Does any cat wonder that I'm concerned about the safety of my kits?"

Almost all of ThunderClan had gasped in horror, wondering how he knew about Swiftpaw and Brightpaw. Waterlily narrowed her eyes again in disgust. She knew exactly who had told him. *Darkstripe*! She wanted to claw his eyes out, but spared him since it was still

the Gathering. Waterlily shook her head to clear it, but more thoughts just kept coming and she missed most of what happened between Bluestar and Tigerstar. She had just caught the end of it.

Tigerstar dipped his head. "Very well." He agreed. "Next Gathering, bring them to me." Then the Gathering was drawn to a close.

Waterlily tilted her head to the side. Leopardstar didn't say anything about her Clan. Was RiverClan truly apart of ShadowClan now? Waterlily shook that thought out of the way and reluctantly followed Bluestar up the slope. She returned to the ThunderClan camp, her heart heavy with the weight of the recent Gathering. The tension in the air was noticeable, the conflict between Tigerstar's demands and Bluestar's refusal casting a shadow over the Clan.

Everyone could sense the tension when Bluestar padded into camp. Normally she would jump onto the highrock and talk about what had happened since all cats were up and wondering about Tigerstar intentions. But instead, she padded back into her den.

Waterlily settled into her den, arranging her herbs with a distracted mind. The events of the Gathering played over and over in her thoughts. Tigerstar's demand for Bramblepaw and Tawnypaw had been a shock to them all. Giving them only until the next Gathering to hand over the apprentices, was like a sword hanging over their heads.

Sighing softly, Waterlily picked up a few herbs, her paws tracing their edges absentmindedly. As she continued to sort her herbs, her gaze drifted to the moonlit entrance of her den. The moon still hung high in the sky. She finished the few herbs she had left, then padded to her nest. She circled around in the moss, making it a little flatter. Then she settled herself down, tucking her front paws under her chest. She closed her eyes and let the Gathering problems drift away from her mind and let new thoughts came in. She still wanted to know why Shadowpaw was destined to be here in ThunderClan. He showed no signs of wanting to join Tigerstar. Tigerstar showed no interest in him either. But perhaps Tigerstar has planned it that way and he plans on making Shadowpaw do something later...

Chapter Twenty Six

Waterlily's paws stilled as the urgent commotion reached her ears. Her heart raced, and her instincts as a medicine cat kicked in, sending a surge of adrenaline through her veins. Dropping the herbs she had been sorting, she quickly moved to the entrance of her den to see the patrol rushing into the camp. Waterlily watched in horror as Cloudtail carried a dead body in his jaws. It was Brindleface. Waterlily's heart began racing with fear and she padded out into the clearing. She padded by Fireheart's side. His green gaze was unreadable, but she could sense he was very angry. "What happened?" She finally mewed softly in his ear.

"I'll tell you in a bit." He meowed quickly, then padded over to the burial place to bury their clanmate, Brindleface.

Waterlily followed them, with the rest of the Clan behind them. The burial went by fast and they barely had time to mourn. Once they were through, Fireheart trekked back into the clearing and jumped up onto the highrock.

Fireheart's voice rang out, his words heavy with urgency. "Cats of ThunderClan." He began. "We discovered that there's a pack of dogs on our territory, living in the caves at Snakerocks."

Murmuring broke out among the assembled cats, along with a few yowls of defiance. "Tigerstar has been feeding the dogs." He went on, struggling to keep his voice calm, "And he has laid a trail of dead rabbits to lead them right into our camp. You all know what lay at the end of that trail." He dipped his head toward the place outside the camp where Brindleface had been buried.

He had to signal with his tail for silence as a chorus of wailing broke out. Waterlily glanced over at the two new apprentices, waiting to see if they would show any signs of defiance or shock just like the rest of the Clan. Tawnypaw was staring at him with horror in her face while Bramblepaw's emotions remained unknown.

"We have tried to break the trail, but the rabbits have lain there all night, and the pack will follow the scent they left behind. We must all leave—elders, kits, everyone. If the dogs come to the camp they must not find us here." Continued Fireheart.

More sounds of dismay, this time a low, anxious murmuring. Dappletail, an aged, once-pretty tortoiseshell she-cat, called out. "Where shall we go?"

"To Sunningrocks," Fireheart replied boldly. "Once you're there, climb the tallest trees you can find. If the dogs follow you, they'll think they lost the scent on the rocks, and they won't look for you."

To his relief, the Clan grew quieter now that he had given them definite orders, though the cats still crouched in grief for Brindleface. Her kits, the apprentices Fernpaw and Ashpaw, were pressed close together with looks of stunned horror on their faces.

"And what about the pack?" Dustpelt asked. "What are we going to do about them?"

"We'll steal the trail!" He blurted out rather loudly.

"What do you mean?" Sandstorm asked, her green eyes wide.

"Just what I say. Tigerstar wants to lead the dogs right to our camp. Fine. We'll let him do that. And when they arrive, we'll be waiting—to take them to the gorge." He paused, looking around the camp. "We'll need to lure the dogs over the edge," Fireheart went on, the details of the plan taking shape in his mind as he spoke. "I'll need warriors who can run fast." His dark green gaze swept the cats around him. "Graystripe. Sandstorm. Mousefur and Longtail. Dustpelt. And I'm going myself. That should be enough. The rest of you gather by the camp entrance, ready to move out."

The appointed warriors dipped their heads. Waterlily narrowed her eyes. If they were to leave, she would need something to take herbs. She couldn't leave them all behind. As she headed back to her den, she heard Shadowpaw's once soft voice carry out through the Clan clearing. "What about me?" He meowed, pleadingly. "I'm fast!"

Fireheart shook his head. "No. I'm sorry, Shadowpaw. I can't risk losing any warriors. Stay with the rest of the Clan and be ready to move out when we return."

Shadowpaw dipped his head in acceptance, though Waterlily knew he really wanted to go with his mentor. He was rather fast. He could catch rabbits just like Sandstorm after all! Waterlily turned back and headed for the medicine den to gather up some supplies. She guessed that she would need some cobwebs, chervil, comfrey roots, and goldenrod and honey. She pulled out a burdock leaf from the back of her storage piles and put the needed herbs onto it. She neatly wrapped it up firmly, and carried it in her jaws as she followed the rest of the Clan that stayed back up the ravine. Everyone stopped just before the gorse tunnel, just like Fireheart had ordered them to do so.

Waterlily gently put down her herbs and looked around, seeing who all was left. Bluestar flicked her tail as she padded up to the front. "Fireheart has told me what all has happened." She meowed, glancing over at Waterlily. "Do you suppose this plan of his will work?"

Waterlily nodded. "Of course I do. He is a loyal deputy." She retorted quickly. She knew how much Bluestar thought they were all traitors. Though if she was speaking to Waterlily, perhaps not all were traitors to her. Did she trust Waterlily?

"Good. Let's go then." Bluestar rasped then bounded off towards Sunningrocks.

Waterlily and the rest of the Clan followed her closely. Whitestorm stayed close behind Bluestar, keeping her last life sacred. Waterlily brushed against Whitestorm. "Fireheart told me to keep her safe." He whispered softly in her ear. "I vow to keep that even if it means I die."

Waterlily widened her eyes alarm. If Whitestorm died trying to save Bluestar, who knows what would happen to Bluestar after that. But she shook the thought out of her head. She didn't want to think of Bluestar dying. They've had too many deaths already. She couldn't bare losing another cat that was once close to her.

Bluestar paused at the edge of Sunningrocks. Her ears were twitching as if she heard some ghost yowling out her name. Waterlily did the same, but she couldn't hear anything. "We should help Fireheart." She softly growled, looking back at her Clan.

"He has a plan, remember?" It was Whitestorm who replied as he took a small pace forward. His tail twitching impatiently, hoping Bluestar listened to him.

"I remember." She snapped. "But I have a slight feeling that maybe it won't."

Waterlily tilted her head to the side. She could see Bluestar's thoughts going back to her dream with StarClan. Pack, pack, kil kill. Was just repeating in her mind. She was worried that the end would come... and faster than they realized.

Waterlily reluctantly stayed back as Bluestar bounded towards Snakerocks where Fireheart as his warriors went to look for the dog pack. Whitestorm put a paw in front of Bluestar, hoping she would stop, but she stepped over it and hissed as she passed him. "You cannot stop me, Whitestorm." She mewed softly, then continued to fade away in the distance of the trees. Waterlily longed to follow her in secret, but she had to stay here in case she needed healing when she returned.

Time was going by too slowly and everyone was beginning to feel restless. Waterlily paced to and fro, worried that something bad has happened. She could feel something in her gut like she had to retch it out, but she tried to keep it down.

"She'll be fine." Whitestorm reassured her. "She has to be." He looked over in the distance as he finally saw a flame-colored pelt pad towards them. His eyes wide with horror as he saw Fireheart carrying a lifeless blue-gray body.

Waterlily turned to see what he was seeing and she gasped. "No! Bluestar!" She yowled. "We were supposed to keep her safe!" She added, wailing like a lost kit.

Fireheart gently put down Bluestar's body and dipped his head low.

"Do not blame yourselves. She was only trying to save me." Tears ran down his cheek.

Waterlily raced to his side and knew instantly that he was telling the truth. She pressed her body against his, making sure that he was able to still stand. He had low energy, though he had little scratches on his body. He felt as if the weight of the whole Clan had descended on his shoulders, for he was now the new leader of ThunderClan. He had to kill Tigerstar... and the reign of him would be defeated. At least that's what Fireheart had hoped. Waterlily widened her eyes as she silently read his mind. He was worried that Bramblepaw might be just like his father. That's why he took him on as his apprentice.